

Beyond Autoethnography: Fictocriticism as a Feminist Writing Strategy

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[**Abstract:** Recent criticism interrogates a trend where Asian diasporic writers have been read as providing “authentic” insights on cultural difference. This essay interprets Yasmin Ladha’s works as examples of South Asian writing that unsettle reductive notions of diasporic identity. Some of Ladha’s work is in the experimental manner associated with feminist, interventionist writing called fictocriticism, which breaks down the boundaries between fiction and criticism, reader and writer, through techniques such as fragmentation and juxtaposition. I suggest that fictocriticism emphasizes a multiplicity of subjective experiences, making it a particularly cogent strategy for eluding—and calling attention to—reductive autoethnographic interpretations of Ladha’s work.]

Yasmin Ladha’s 1992 short story collection, *Lion’s Granddaughter and Other Stories*, explores the implications of cultural difference for immigrants in Africa and Canada through the eyes of female protagonists. In the last pages, the narrator states that she does not “want to be the sturdy alphabet to set a novice at ease in Other literature—a vaccination prior to his/her flight into the Third World”; yet, in the next breath, she laments “but sometimes, it has to be done, then I can’t help it” (97). These self-aware lines suggest the author’s consideration of her paradoxical role in perpetuating or disrupting essentialist understandings of ethnicity that can often be read into “Other literature” written by diasporic writers. Such readings reflect a trend whereby regardless of whether they intended their work to

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represent their cultural group, writers who are members of Asian diasporas in Canada are assumed to provide 'authentic' insights into experiences of cultural difference.

In *The Postcolonial Exotic: Marketing the Margins*, Graham Huggan describes the exoticization and consumption of creative and critical work on subjects related to ethnic difference. For Huggan concepts like "marginality", 'authenticity', and 'resistance' circulate as commodities available for commercial exploitation" (xvi). This characterization can be applied to the over-determined reception of diasporic literature in Canada. Many contributors in Eleanor Ty and Christl Verduyn's anthology, *Asian Canadian Writing Beyond Autoethnography*, suggest that diasporic literature in Canada is often understood as autoethnography—a narrative about the experiences of a minority ethnic group as told by a member of the group. Smaro Kamboureli observes that this reading strategy "proceeds on the assumption that there is an inexorable affinity between [writers] and their respective cultures and communities" and does not address the author's relationship to, and the complex constitution of, these communities ("Politics" 39). Such a way of understanding autoethnography further marginalizes aspects of diasporic identity such as gender and sexuality, which are not perceived as directly related to ethnicity. It risks suppressing uneven and shifting power relations that exist *within* the ethnic group.

Ladha's writing integrates the South Asian diasporic experience in Africa and Canada, thus providing a unique perspective on questions of ethnicity and belonging arising out of her familial experience. This essay interprets two of Ladha's works as examples of South Asian diasporic writing that unsettle reductive notions of diasporic identity which exclusively emphasize ethnicity. Ty and Christl Verduyn's anthology examines Asian Canadian writing presenting experiences other than, or in addition to, cultural difference, by using aesthetic or formal qualities that complicate any reading that would consider it representative of a minority group. Ladha's writing does both: in terms of subject, her female protagonists retell the familiar immigrant story specifically to disrupt essentializing claims on women's subjectivity; in terms of form, her short story collection, *Lion's Granddaughter and Other Stories*, is written in an experimental manner often associated with feminist, interventionist writing termed "fictocriticism." Fictocriticism is self-reflexive writing that breaks down the boundaries between fiction and criticism, reader and writer, by using aesthetic techniques such as fragmentation and juxtaposition. Fictocriticism emphasizes a multiplicity of subjective experiences, making it a particularly cogent strategy for eluding—and calling attention to—reductive autoethnographic interpretations of Ladha's work.

Ladha's recent novel, *Blue Sunflower Startle* (2010), keeps much of the same subject material as *Lion's Granddaughter* and remains concerned with emphasizing gendered experiences. Yet, aesthetically, it offers an easily transmitted, continuous narrative, and its content is less polemical than the accounts of objectification and sexual abuse found in *Lion's Granddaughter*. It can be argued that this combination is a conscious tactic on the part of the author. Mindful of Huggan's proposal that authors can benefit from manipulating their marginality value in the system of the postcolonial exotic, this essay concludes with the suggestion that Ladha's novel is a less oppositional, more strategic fictocritical intervention than it may first appear. It takes advantage of its potential reception as exoticized autoethnography, even while it undercuts this reading practice by pointing to gender and sexuality as aspects of the multiple, fluid identities within South Asian diasporas.

Speaking of Ethnicity

Kamboureli recalls that the genre of autoethnography constitutes a "radical shift" both aesthetically and methodologically; it is historiography that serves as a "compensatory response" on the part of minority subjects responding directly to problematic ethnographic representations by asserting their experiences in their own words ("Politics" 33).¹ However, reading diasporic literature as autoethnography emphasizes ethnicity at the expense of other aspects of identity. Larissa Lai notes that "breaking the silence" is not always liberatory; while exposing the experiences of those excluded from official nationalist discourse, "self-writing" also risks rehearsing a self/other binary, and deeply marginalizing other aspects of subjectivity thus creating a marginalized sub-group *within* the ethnic group (87). North American literary critics "[read] ethnic literatures *as* ethnic literatures," understanding ethnic authors to be representative of their diaspora group and legitimizing works that support popular conceptions of that group (P. Lai 55). When diasporic literature is co-opted by Huggan's marginality market in these ways then consumed by a mainstream global readership as simply ethnographic, otherwise subversive autoethnographic writings are read in a way that reinforces stereotypes rather than promotes a nuanced understanding of diasporic identity as multifaceted.

Naming the maintenance of simplistic narratives about the ethnic other can be constructive; Kamboureli thinks that "identifying complicity is not about moralizing, but about the possibility of creating productive sites" ("Politics" 43). In keeping with this optimism, Ty and Verduyn suggest that recent Asian Canadian diasporic cultural productions acknowledge the quandaries of representation, and explore more complex identities and aesthetic forms. In particular, they

mention how “gender and sexuality have further complicated the assumptions about the ethnic subject and its representation” (3).

Ladha’s fictocriticism is a useful example of recent diasporic writing that challenges essentialist representations of ethnicity in this manner. At the level of form, Ladha’s experimental prose challenges realist forms; at the level of subject, Ladha emphasizes experiences of cultural difference from the intersection of gender and ethnicity. As James Clifford has noted, “diasporic experiences are always gendered. But there is a tendency for theoretical accounts of diasporas and diaspora cultures to hide this fact . . . thus normalizing male experiences” (258). While Ladha examines immigration and diasporic subjectivity from the perspectives of women, her experimental and fragmented aesthetic form resists being read, in turn, as representative of a generic female experience.

Ficto-Who?

Lion’s Granddaughter and Other Stories relates the rise of a racialized brand of nationalism in the aftermath of East African independence from colonial rule. As the white colonizers left, the largely middle-class Indians who had traveled between colonies felt the fervor of black nationalism, and many migrated to Canada during the 1970s. Some stories in the collection also describe experiences of cultural difference of immigrants in Canada. All the stories present female protagonists in various settings.

The collection makes autobiographical links between the work and the author, seemingly casting the work as the exposition of an authentic immigrant—perhaps an engagement in marketing the exotic, in Huggan’s terms. The back cover features a photo of the author above excerpted lines of Ladha’s prose, and then explains that within the pages, “Yasmin Ladha integrates the wisdom of her Indian-Muslim heritage and her experience as a Canadian immigrant in a rich and colourfully woven collection of stories which celebrate the female spirit.” This characterization is fortified by the inclusion of an author biography that opens with the details of Ladha’s birthplace and immigration, the setting of many of her stories (102). Despite not answering the question whether the author’s lived experiences influenced the stories, or whether the stories influenced the publisher’s biography and back cover, that is, whether the author means to represent her work as autoethnography, or whether the work is *being presented* as autoethnography, a link is nonetheless made between the author’s cultural background and her writing.

Yet, *Lion’s Granddaughter* reads markedly differently from other accounts of the Asian diaspora in Canada. The collection is still concerned with the subject of cultural difference, but Ladha inflects her

discussions of race and representation with gendered experiences to illustrate the brutal intersection of racism and sexism. Ladha uses a politicized, experimental mode of feminist writing, fictocriticism, a practice that Helen Flavell has argued “is concerned with interrogating the violence of representation, to legitimately explore what is inevitably left out and or misrepresented” (*Writing-Between* 10). Fictocritical writers do so by disturbing academic conventions such as genre or the authoritative/authorial voice. In terms of form, fictocritical writing often moves quickly between fragmented perspectives and blends multiple genres with other forms of writing, including lists and such “literary detritus” (“Bodies” n.pag.). In terms of purpose, fictocritical writing aims to problematize binary groupings such as “objective” academic discourse and fiction, writer and reader, self and other. Some writers have harnessed fictocritical writing to prove less politically charged points within the academy; however, it is more interesting to emphasize “the political intent of the form when employed as a strategic act by those on the margin” (“Who Killed” n.pag.). Ladha’s alternative fictocritical account is one example of a politically inspired shift in the subject and form of diasporic cultural productions toward exposing essentialist readings of difference, specifically by highlighting a marginalized female subjectivity. Vijay Mishra characterizes the thematic and formal traits of *Lion’s Granddaughter* as a feminist use of the fictocritical aesthetic (160). Expanding on Mishra’s reading of *Lion’s Granddaughter*, I argue that Ladha’s use of fictocriticism is primarily a feminist re-evaluation of patriarchal academic and creative practices that entrench essentialist, masculine representations of the ethnic Other.

This feminist deconstruction of exoticist reading practices begins in the first story, “Beena,” in which the “*Pen-walli*” narrator implicates the reader in creating the character of Beena by casting him as the male protagonist. On the first page of the collection, Ladha declares a relationship between the narrator and her *Readerji*: “I shan’t call you reader. One who reads, hah! That’s so undeclared. Blank as a daft blue form: ‘Resident of?’ ‘In the Dominion of?’ ‘Port of Embarkation/Disembarkation?’ ‘Destitute-Festitute?’ Blue muscle of power. Generic” (*Lion’s Granddaughter* 1). Ladha asserts the importance of the reader’s position by undercutting the notion of a generic “one” who reads. The inflection in “destitute-festitute” combined with the exclamations of “*La!*” and italicized words in un-English that dot the page are a pointed assertion of the narrator’s ethnic subjectivity. Within the first few lines of her collection, Ladha introduces the unequal relationship between her immigrant narrator and the authorities of the country of immigration. Ladha then provokes a tense argument with the unassuming *Readerji*, who attempts to correct

her with the addition of the indefinite article: “A reader,” presumably to distance himself from the personalization being thrust upon him, a gesture which the narrator indicates is a justified intrusion. If the reader can plumb the words of the author for *her* biographical details in order to position her as Other writer, then the author should also be able to reply: “*Readerji*, for a change, let me ask you a question? Why *Beena* from all the other books?” (6). Again, Ladha asserts the importance of the reader’s position in choosing to read her exotic “ethnic” work.

Throughout this story, Ladha reveals a narrator who believes that *Readerji* has been badly influenced by “the critic’s English” (1); he has approached her text slavishly, with formulaic expectations that offend her:

Readerji, I command you, banish the critic from your eye, this instant, *fatafat!* . . . *Readerji*, by bending, yes-Masta, yes-Masta, you follow the colonizer-critic to his bed! You have made me a widow. Wait, I will even wipe off my red-*bindi*, this moon-dot between my eyebrows, my *shakti*-power *Readerji*, I ask you, will the critic’s privilege, his Brahmin privilege, will it ever cease?” (1-2)

In this passage, Ladha emphasizes a multiplicity of perspectives in her writing by implying the co-existence of three characters: the narrator behind the first person “I,” *Readerji*, and the “colonizer-critic.” Importantly, Ladha distinguishes between reader and critic, though they may, in practice, constitute one act performed by one person. In this sense, when she bans the privileged critic from her text for disrupting her relationship with the reader, Ladha wedges herself into the mind of her reader-critic, between his or her institutional training and potential to understand her work less formulaically. As Flavell describes, “fictocritical texts are deeply troubled by the colonising role of critical or academic writing” (*Writing-Between* 10). This Eurocentric viewpoint is not welcome in the narrator’s tale for Ladha literally refuses to be read simply as the “Other” writer. Equally importantly, in these passages and throughout the collection, Ladha’s narrative voice asserts her female subjectivity in conjunction with her ethnic subjectivity. Her references to bangles and *bindis* are specifically female, but also connote a South Asian culture. In these first few pages, Ladha has demonstrated fictocriticism as a mode of anticipating, and then explicitly resisting, the reader-critic’s prejudices of ethnic literature, his hunt for the exotic, by highlighting this figure’s gendered and racialized preconceptions, and by gendering this figure as male.

Ladha’s narrator further clarifies her reasons for writing. In the last story, “giving up the company of women,” she sarcastically evokes Ondaatje, Kureshi, and Rushdie as the “clan-*wallahs* of Other writing” before telling the reader that she “create[s] from she-space,” but is also

“known as an ‘Other writer’” (86). The order of these descriptions connotes their influence on the collection. The story “giving up the company of women” might be read as a confession of the author’s deliberate assertion of her female subjectivity to interrupt the masculinity of diasporic discourse: “The erection of ‘males write about the real thing’ is bunk, first-class bunk. I, a woman-story-maker, want to disturb such an erection” (88). The process of wading into this discourse to perform her feminist fictocritical intervention, however, is bittersweet. She must give up the company of women. With her own, she can “wallow in self-indulgence, a wonderful mud only in the company of women” rather than perform didactic interventions (89). But as “an ‘Other writer’” who is also a “woman-story-maker,” Ladha suggests, she must wrestle with *Readerji*’s patriarchal and Eurocentric preconceptions (94).

If Ladha highlights female diasporic experiences to problematize an essentialist image of the masculine ethnic other in literature, the back cover and author biography’s emphasis on Ladha’s ethnic and immigration details as the inspiration for her stories may be considered part of a fictocritical strategy: the autobiographical anecdote. Rosslyn Prosser has written that to render subjectivity “in the fictocritical is to attempt a writing and reading of the anecdote as shaped by historical and social circumstance” (n.pag.). Fictocritical writing emphasizes the necessary constructed-ness of the anecdote rather than its status as a “true story.” Rather than using autobiographical anecdotes about cultural difference solely for their autoethnographic value, Ladha offers them as a lens through which to see racialized experiences of sexism. In *Lion’s Granddaughter*, details of ethnic difference are peppered with striking accounts of female sexual objectification and sexual violence to present a marginalized female subjectivity.

The female protagonists in *Lion’s Granddaughter* range from pre-teen Aisha or Shil who watch the tumultuous independence of East Africa, to voluptuous Shabnam who coyly deflects ominous male attention, to our nameless—yet forcefully present—narrator traveling in India and Canada. Despite their differences, these characters are all female, and none of them are white. These are important commonalities, because through these characters Ladha brings to light the racialized nature of sexual violence and objectification. For instance, “Peace Flats” relates the story of an Indian family’s relationship with their black servant, Juma, amidst class and race based protests against government nationalizations in Tanzania. The young protagonist, Shil, listens to President Nyerere joking on the radio about a black servant dispatched to the airport to pick up “Madam’s daughter, Tina,” who ends up being “Madam’s dog” (66-67). Nyerere’s story is meant as a double-edged insult, as it mocks the colonizer class as well

as the image of the groveling servant. But in her telling, Ladha reveals another stereotype:

Back of mind, I say, what if this Tina is youthful and has the white woman walk, that flying swing that her breasts go bob-a-bob! . . . Yes, it is good to sit outside New Stanley eating groundnuts, watching them like bwana folk watched us not so long ago. It is good to watch white women's flesh leap. (66-67)

Here, race and gender clearly inform assumptions of sexuality and availability. All white women are deemed sexually available with the implication of the "white woman walk" that invites the male gaze. Yet, the white woman is also seen to be unavailable to those beneath her in a racial hierarchy: Nyerere's caricature, the black man, ridicules his white master behind his back and watches the "white women's flesh leap," but in the end, he still carries Tina the dog with white gloves.

The positioning of the largely property-owning mercantile Indians in East Africa on the racial power hierarchy is directly related to the nature of the objectification of Indian women in *Lion's Granddaughter*. Indian women, especially those thought to be "London-Returned," are objectified by association with the "loose" Europeans (73). Yet, in several tales, the Indian woman is reminded of her place as a "coloured" woman, not unreachable like the white woman she imitates. Ladha explicates this stereotype of the Indian woman in "Be a Doctor," a story that describes the pressures of immigration on a young girl. In one scene, the comedy radio program that is broadcast right after President Nyerere's speech describes:

One fat Indian mama . . . Her black servant cooks, he cleans, he washes, he dries, he shops, he digs—I mean he digs her garden, not in her of course! She is too good for him then! . . . So this servant says to this East Indian Queen Elizabeth of us Blacks . . . 'I can't carry all these utensils on one tray.' So the fat darkie Royal Queen advises, 'First carry the tray in, then fall all you want!'. . . First the British, Big Bwana and his gun and pipe. And then the East Indian money frog. (22)

Here the Indian woman is sexualized in terms of repression and denial. Importantly, this objectification is couched in the explicit association of Indians with the British empire as replacement colonizers, with names like "East Indian Queen Elizabeth of us Blacks" or "fat darkie Royal Queen," or even in the syntactical positioning of "First the British, Big Bwana" and "then the East Indian money frog." Despite this association, the comedian carefully points out his subject's skin colour several times as well as her status as *replacement* colonizer—not the real thing.

In the story “Peace Flats,” Shil is sexualized based on simply her affiliation with dark skin. When Juma attacks her a second time at the end of a story, he underscores Shil’s secret Indian-African parentage in the context of her crush on a Kenyan boy, Khoti:

“You like Black Boys?” I try to pull down my skirt but he is too strong. “What’s the matter? Indian stick no good? . . . Flabby Indian capitalist can’t even please his woman now that the Government has taken away his property—*La!*” . . . Juma knows all along, what he says in my ear before he throws me out of his ironing room, “Indian stick not strong for you, eh Shil?” (76-77)

In this passage, Juma racializes his gendered violence by implying that “Black Boys” are more sexually robust than “Indian sticks,” and that Shil’s mixed race affects her sexuality. Juma further politicizes his attack by mentioning government seizures of Indian properties, which connects his actions to the nationalist and race-based politics of the day. In each of these examples, Ladha considers experiences of cultural difference and their intersections with patriarchy. In the context of fictocriticism’s use of the autobiographical anecdote as a strategy to orient the reader’s perspective, Ladha uses the collection’s links to her autobiographical details strategically: when she describes instances in which male sexual violence and objectification seem to be strongly tied to race, the gesture is toward the lacunae of “she-space” in popular autoethnographic accounts of the Asian diaspora (85). Ty and Verduyn use the phrase beyond autoethnography “to characterize and highlight texts that refuse to be contained simply by their ethnic markers” (4). *Lion’s Granddaughter* reaches for the beyond in this respect: against the backdrop of ethnic difference, the text foregrounds feminist concerns through the use of fictocritical strategies. If, as Anna Gibbs suggests, disciplinary academic authority demands the incessant repetition of dominant ideas, then fictocritical writing makes a performance out of this repetition (“Fictocriticism” n.pag). Ladha uses the genre to perform a repetition of the “authentic” immigrant trope while inserting a female perspective in order to distort the familiarity of the story and thus engender a difference.

It is important, at this point, to consider this paper’s usage of “a female perspective.” Like *Readerji*, the indefinite article is emphasized to imply both a multiplicity of perspectives and a similarity between these perspectives, as they are “one of a class,” as in “a reader,” or “a female perspective.” In his chapter on women’s ethnic autobiography and authenticity, Huggan issues a fair warning against substituting a gendered experience for an ethnic one in what amounts to just another form of essentialism (161). On the contrary Ladha’s use of fictocriticism prevents her experience from being essentialized as

representative of South Asian women due to some of its formal techniques.

First, if fictocriticism aims to explore new ways to think about binary groupings like self and other, it seems fitting that the “self” of writing—the authorial/authoritative voice—is complicated. Ladha makes her own fragmented and partial self clear when she pleads with *Readerji* to have patience with her experiment: “Hey don’t leave me to my newfound independence! What do you mean I am scaring the shit out of you? Even I am unaccustomed to popping in and out of pages with *achar* and *chai*” (2). Overtly self-reflexive instances like these force the reader to face the contingent and partial nature of writing and knowledge, since the authorial self does not presume any expertise, and implicates the reader in the story she tells.

Second, a common characteristic of fictocriticism is constant, abrupt movement between perspectives. *Lion’s Granddaughter* explores several different characters and their relationships to those around them. In “Beena,” for example, Ladha creates the narrator’s point of view and assumes *Readerji*’s, then speaks as Beena, Beena’s mother/Pindi’s wife, and finally as Pindi himself. This type of movement has been framed a “social movement” by Anne Deslandes, who interprets this characteristic of fictocritical writing to “allow the social critic/activist to move between master and othered frames” of thinking as an activist intervention (243). Aesthetically speaking, however, the movement between perspectives is also related to the fragmented collage/montage tendency of fictocriticism. In “Beena,” Ladha signals switches of perspective with a line break and a change of font-size which gives the impression of an interruption and juxtaposes all of these perspectives as fragments. The collection as a whole emanates this discomfiting quality, since the short story form is punctuated with poetry, letters and direct address from the narrator. Further, the creation of several overlapping characters and narratives operate as interrupting fragments of a “whole” story from several different perspectives. The fragmentary form of Ladha’s writing is important as it does not boast closure or totality. In the context of ethnic writing that can be read as autoethnography, Ladha’s fragmentary form evinces an understanding of an evolving and changing ethnic identity and remains open-ended. The juxtaposition of these fragments of perspective and genre is a third important aesthetic ingredient in fictocritical writing that aims to disturb ossified narratives. In *Lion’s Granddaughter*, the juxtaposition of several female characters emphasizes the complexity of diasporic identities, while disabling potential readings of Ladha’s autobiography as representative of the immigrant experience—her story is only one among the several she tells.

Ladha's use of fictocriticism is a politically charged intervention that confronts the paralyzing emphasis on ethnic subjectivity in diasporic literature and criticism. This quality of Ladha's writing gets to the crux of my reading. By accentuating feminist concerns *as well as* her diasporic experiences, and by forgoing realism as a narrative technique in exchange for fragmented forms and juxtaposed perspectives, Ladha insists on an understanding of diasporic identity as multifaceted. Fictocriticism, then, is a particularly useful method by which to reach beyond autoethnography, as it involves "moving away from questions of 'authenticity,' essentialist identity politics, and a view of cultural group that is static, rather than evolving" (Ty and Verduyn 4). Ladha's use of this method simultaneously confronts these problems and compels her reader toward a more versatile understanding of ethnicity.

"Smooth as a Sliding Door": Strategy in the Diaspora

Ladha's most recent novel, *Blue Sunflower Startle*, shares several traits with her previously published collection of short stories. In addition to overlapping details of plot, character, setting, and phrasing, the novel also deals with racialized and gendered experiences of difference. While readers might grapple with the content and aesthetic form of the overtly challenging fictocriticism of *Lion's Granddaughter*, *Blue Sunflower Startle's* discussion of the intersecting oppressions of race and gender conspicuously omits negative impressions of Canada. It also offers a largely continuous narrative with few abrasions of chronology or genre, though Ladha's characteristically lucid poetic prose does incorporate some of the elements of fictocriticism introduced in the last section. For these reasons, *Blue Sunflower Startle* may be considered by some as a commodity for circulation in Huggan's marginality market. It is more palatable to a mainstream Canadian audience because it is less oppositional in form and subject matter than *Lion's Granddaughter*.

In *Blue Sunflower Startle*, Ladha's narrator again namelessly occupies the first person, and recalls the turmoil of being sent by her widowed mother to live with her grandparents in Dodoma when she and her brother were children. These recollections are framed in the context of a newly independent Tanzania influenced by race-based nationalism. Eventually the young Muslim-Indian narrator and what is left of her family (Brother, Mother, and Maa) flee to the Canada of Trudeau, the "tall hero" of racially persecuted East African-Indians (75). Newly arrived, the whimsical narrator decides to love her new Calgary home "like a lover" (86). However, Prairie arms cannot hold her in adulthood. She travels the globe and writes of her adventures, but often returns to the Canadian city that she refers to as "home."

The details of character, setting, plot, and phrasing, especially in the first section of the novel, echo those of the short story collection. Characters reappear, as does the politician's jovial, yet ominous, radio address and details of the exodus of Indians from Tanzania for Canada, permitted to carry \$200 each. And once again, Ladha asserts the particularities of female experience through tales of male sexual violence and harassment in several geographic settings. The repetition allows us to examine how *Blue Sunflower Startle* incorporates Ladha's own autobiographical details. Unlike the back cover summary and author biography of *Lion's Granddaughter*, the novel boasts no such revelation of the author's heritage and its explicit links to her writing. Two decades later her work's description and her biography seem to have shed the previously fashionable claims on authenticity based on experience. Yet, if *Lion's Granddaughter* was explicitly autobiographical, then the same autobiographical details proliferate this novel as well. Ladha can be interpreted as writing again about the experiences of her minority ethnic group. While the novel, like the short story collection, is more or less autoethnographic in content it complicates such a reading by reaching beyond a solely racialized subjectivity to emphasize women's experiences at the intersection of race and gender. It does so in a form that implicitly issues a challenge to the patriarchally aligned institutions of cultural production. My reading of *Blue Sunflower Startle* will examine this novel against the same theoretical rubric of reaching beyond autoethnography. I will consider Ladha's treatment of women's experiences and her aesthetic deployment of this genre will be considered before assessing the novel's success as a strategic fictocritical intervention.

In the evaluation of women's experiences of patriarchy as it intersects with ethnicity, the novel's tone differs greatly from the confrontational short stories. Ladha still explores the interplay of race and gender, but chooses to emphasize the outcomes of such an intersection in the positive experiences that Canada offers to immigrant women. The celebration of Canada as a symbol of freedom for women gives the novel a nationalist flair that clearly makes it a more appealing representation of the Asian Canadian diasporic experience. For Grandmother and other women in the novel, Canada is a land of opportunity. Ladha paints Grandmother as almost a different character in the Canadian setting of the book, even changing her name from "Grandmother" to the more informal "Maa." In Dodoma, "Grandmother performs her dharma without stumbling" even while Grandfather is jailed or drinks too (67). But the narrator notices that "since coming to Canada, Grandmother has risen out of the ashes" (95). In one memorable instance, Maa reminds the narrator: "Here, I am free. I can live by my own intentions. Back in Dodoma . . . I was always . . .

cleaning his dump with an invisible toilet brush" (96). With the opposition between "there" and "here," Ladha gestures toward what critics like Clifford have described as the space that migration offers to diasporic women to renegotiate oppressive gender relations (259). Though Ladha lends her words to the Canada that allows Maa to shed "the glut of wifely dharma," the freedom that her novel's female characters celebrate can be misleading (99). Maa seems to forget the influence of male absence on her liberation. In the first section of the novel set in Africa, Ladha describes how even in a darkened Hindi film theatre, when men leave the room "there is instant relief among the women" (42). Grandmother attributes her dearly held, newfound liberty solely to Canada rather than the freedom afforded by the passing away of her husband and freedom from wifely and motherly duties. This works to mistakenly credit Canada as a nation permitting women's freedom, and eschews the opportunity to analyze sexism that Ladha points out in other settings.

Given the details of sexual harassment in other national contexts throughout the novel, a lack of any such occurrences in the Canadian setting is conspicuous. Ladha's vivid descriptions enable an easily recalled tableaux: politicians on the radio in Tanzania who make innuendos about Indian women; the mill worker who assaults the narrator as a girl-child; "the asshole" and other "goombahs" in India whose lewd advances turn her into a "furtive cat trying to get away from a pack of street dogs" (147). Compared to these instances, the strangers Ladha presents in the Canadian setting are only ever well-meaning such as the "downright homegrown" Albertan hero who rushes to the rescue of confused immigrants leading Ladha's narrator to remember that "five Albertans will jump out of five separate cars when yours gets stuck in the snow" (97). Canadian men are omitted from the depictions of sexual violence or objectification that take place only in other, non-Western settings, mistakenly aestheticizing the country as a safe haven for ethnically marginalized women.² In the context of an absence of negative impressions, Ladha's celebratory nationalism might be read as a surprisingly uncritical salute to the Canadian state. Having read *Lion's Granddaughter* as a fictocritical intervention that confronts the intersection of race-based nationalism and patriarchy, there is a suspicious gap in the novel's optimistic rendering of diasporic women's experiences in Canada.

Huggan issues an implicit warning about reading fiction as autoethnography in a chapter called "Consuming India." He quotes Rushdie's critique of those who would disparage *Midnight's Children* for its failure to engage particular circumstances, such as Hindu imperialism or the plight of the untouchables: "these variously disappointed readers were judging the book not as a novel, but as some

sort of inadequate reference book” (71). In this context, nitpicking *Blue Sunflower Startle*’s exclusion of the experiences of women who are marginalized in Canada seems to contradict my own attempt to read ethnic writers critically, beyond autoethnography and not as a reference book. After all, the novel is proclaimed fiction on the back cover. I am ascribing it autoethnographic significance. However, given that I have done so based on the novel’s overlap in detail between an explicitly autobiographically inspired work by the same author, and that Ladha ably and doggedly critiques the joint oppressions of racism and sexism in the same book as well as in her other work, the lack of such an articulation in the Canadian setting is significant. After criticizing the “clan-wallahs of Other writing” and vehemently asserting “I don’t want to be that Other writer” in *Lion’s Granddaughter* why would the author then quell her adversarial stand (86, 87)?

Ladha’s characters serve the rhetorical function of an immigrant extolling the virtues of her new nation, making her a palatable “Other writer.” Compared with the heavy-handed critique of nationalism in *Lion’s Granddaughter*, this swooning and safe love affair with Canada makes the novel a more appealing representative of the heteronormative Asian Canadian diasporic experience. One needs to be mindful of the material context of the novel, since it is published by the Canadian company Freehand Books, who are financially supported by the Canada Book Fund and the Canada Council for the Arts as stated on the copyright page. The book is authored by a self-described “Canadian fiction writer” (167). Considering its homegrown foundation, and its favorable Canadian content, it is likely a Canadian audience will consume this book as “CanLit.” Kamboureli characterizes CanLit as both troubled and troubling. It is troubled because of its tendency to homogenize or occlude particular voices on the one hand, while on the other hand “wresting difference and otherness into a Canadian trope,” if these voices happen to be included under the rubric of CanLit (*Trans.Can.Lit* ix). CanLit is troubling because it can challenge the notion of Canada as an imagined community by offering perspectives that interrupt the homogeneity of the national narrative. In this context, Ladha’s novel may be read more subversively than this paper’s considerations so far have allowed.

Blue Sunflower Startle’s emphasis on a positive immigration experience for women strategically offers a more marketable product for a mainstream CanLit audience. Strategy is the gist of Huggan’s suggestion of a potential use of the marginality market. If as Huggan suggests, the marginalized writer can use his/her market appeal “judiciously to suit [his/her] own . . . ends,” then perhaps we can tease out the strategic dissidence of this novel (11). In my reading, Ladha’s effort is first and foremost to call attention to the particularities of

everyday manifestations of racist sexism in women's lives, especially against the grain of patriarchal renditions of Asian Canadian experiences that are framed by exoticist discourse. Ladha has chosen to incorporate subtle critiques into her novel, rather than the blatant formal and content-driven opposition in *Lion's Granddaughter*. This essay has argued that this is based on a consciousness about the way in which readers will be inclined to read the novel: as autoethnography, written by an "Outside writer" representative of her cultural group. By mitigating the challenge of her experimental fictocritical form, as well as holding back on overt criticisms of Canada, Ladha engages in a tactical compromise. The novel's subtle dissidence lies in underlining women's stories to create a widely accessible forum to discuss gender and sexuality as aspects of a multifaceted diasporic identity. If writing beyond autoethnography is a matter of complicating its focus on a solely ethnic subjectivity, the novel succeeds in this by offering a focus on women's experiences of immigration.

The short story collection might do the same in a bolder manner, considering its fragmented aesthetic and other such challenging aspects of fictocriticism. Though Ladha's lilting poetic prose is challenging, her formal techniques in *Blue Sunflower Startle* are less experimental than those she employs in *Lion's Granddaughter*. While the story collection reveals a self-reflexive authorial voice by creating a narrator who does not presume expertise but implicates the reader in the tale, the novel does the opposite. The tale unfolds in an un-perforated first person, the voice of the narrator through whom characters and settings are filtered. The novel's narrative is continuous, in terms of chronology—from the protagonist's 1970s childhood, to what seems to be her present day—as well as in terms of a lack of interruption. Fragmentation and juxtaposition of perspective and genre, which played large roles in the fictocritical intervention of *Lion's Granddaughter*, are mitigated in the novel to a few poems interspersing the prose, two love letters to the Prairies (that still serve to advance the plot), and some disjointed movement between geographical settings, especially in the last parts of the tale.

The novel is a less abrasive expression of fictocriticism that makes Ladha's autoethnographic intervention more palatable to a mainstream audience, one that might not be willing to spare the time for the gritty details and challenging aesthetic form of *Lion's Granddaughter*. Ladha's novel can still be construed as strategically fictocritical—only less oppositional than the short story collection so as to increase the accessibility of its primary intervention of outlining multiple subjectivities of the South Asian Canadian immigrant.

This more conservative approach might be useful in her novel, assuming Ladha's strategy is to intervene in the way that a larger

audience reads literature written by ethnic authors as autoethnography. If Flavell is correct in noting that less confrontational or experimental forms of fictocriticism garner more critical attention (*Writing-Between* 268, 50), then perhaps Ladha consciously scales back the fictocriticism of her previous work that was designed to elude the institutionalized attention of the “colonizer critic.” The fictocritical strategy in the novel, then, is the opposite: it invites attention with its accessibility, while slyly intervening in established ethnic stereotypes by elucidating gender and sexuality as aspects of the multiple subjectivities of the diasporic person. The novel is less challenging in terms of subject and form perhaps in order to prove to a wider audience a targeted point about writing and reading autoethnography differently. In that sense, Ladha strategically adapts to circumstance in the manner that Grandmother teaches the novel’s narrator to be as “smooth as a sliding door” (50).

This paper has proposed that Yasmin Ladha’s combination of subject and fictocritical form questions homogenizing renderings of the ethnic other in the “patriarchal discourse of the diaspora” (Mishra 160), and presents the possibility for the evolution of an ethnic identity based on multiple aspects of subjectivity. Fictocriticism is thus a particularly salient method by which authors might challenge reductive readings of diasporic writing as autoethnographically “authentic.” In terms of a fictocritical paradigm, described by critics as experimental writing that openly challenges the conventions of creative and critical forms, Ladha’s recent novel is less daring than her bold collection of short stories. Yet in my reading, the novel’s interruption is just as impactful *because* of its subtlety. Especially in the context of the blatant challenges housed in *Lion’s Granddaughter*, *Blue Sunflower Startle* reads as a cunning compromise, a politically driven occupation of a conventional space, designed for the specific purpose of prompting a mainstream Canadian audience to think beyond autoethnography. Though the formal methods differ, a discerning reader might recognize not a dilution, but a continuity of intent between the two works.

Blue Sunflower Startle’s tactic of subtle dissidence is, perhaps, an even more artful fictocritical intervention than Ladha’s previous brazen polemic, because it also implicitly subverts the identification of fictocriticism as an overt challenge. If fictocritics attempt to critique and avoid the colonizing dissections of academic literary criticism, it seems fitting that Ladha’s fictocriticism would evolve in order to elude even the descriptions of fictocriticism that critics have now articulated. Fictocriticism is also liable to be co-opted by Huggan’s marginality market as a minority practice. But Ladha’s novel also evades an easy categorization of fictocriticism as counter-writing, as it challenges critical assumptions that experimental aesthetic form is inherently

resistant, while writing in an aesthetically conventional form is inherently conformist. In her recent work, Ladha moves to evade even a critical reading of resistance in her fictocriticism, instead confecting a palatable argument for an understanding of ethnic identity as multiply affiliated.

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Notes

1. Mary Louise Pratt, for example, has disparaged the genre of ethnography as “a means by which Europeans represent to themselves their (usually subjugated) others” (7). Her description emphasizes that the distance between the author and subject, essential to the “objective” accounting required by the ethnographic form, risks perpetuating ethnic stereotypes and deepening the colonial power hierarchy.

2. It is not, as various government and independent studies have shown. See, for example, the 2008 concluding observations of the United Nations Committee Elimination of Discrimination Against Women, which voices concern that “Aboriginal women and women of various ethnic and minority communities continue to suffer from multiple forms of discrimination” in Canada (9). This report is available at <http://www.unhcr.org/refworld/publisher,CEDAW,CONCOBSERVATIONS,CAN,,0.html>

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