



Insights from Our Mothers: An Intergenerational, Intercontinental Story

Ambika Gopal Raj and Lauren G. McClanahan

INTRODUCTION

As the twenty-first century is well on its way and the global world is smaller and more instantaneous, peoples' cultures, ways of living, knowing, and being are still miles apart and set in the ways as represented by the media. We still think dichotomously in terms of “us” versus “them”, “my culture” versus “their culture”, and so on. Might we find common ground in the wise stories of women? Might we find power in the surprising universality of women's lives and their lived experiences?

A. G. Raj (✉)
California State University, Los Angeles, CA, USA
e-mail: ambika.raj@calstatela.edu

L. G. McClanahan
Department of Media Literacy, Western Washington University,
Bellingham, WA, USA
e-mail: mcclanl@wwu.edu

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Through storying, two academicians learn the stories of two women, their mothers, who are both in their seventies. The mothers, who are both educated and have raised their respective families, have had very different life paths. From growing up in a bustling city in India to growing up on the then-remote Florida Keys, we find similarities in their lives when there was seemingly nothing in common. What insights could these women give us, their daughters, about the last century? What tales could they tell us about similar tumultuous times through the decades? What was happening in each country in the 1950s, 1960s, and beyond that affected both countries and affected these women's lives? What can we learn from their stories about our connectedness and disconnectedness? We, the daughters, "the academics", set out to explore our mothers' stories as an inter-continental storying project.

It had been an idea that finally came to be in the summer of 2017—Lauren coming to visit India and us touring around some sites together. It happened over three weeks in the end of July to August. The sweltering heat in India had turned into cool rainy days in the south but sweaty, humid days in the north. Lauren came with Sandy, her mother, and Sarah, her daughter, from Bellingham, WA. She flew in to Hyderabad, my city, where I had grown up. My children were already in Hyderabad visiting their dad and my mother, Radha, lived there. I reached from Los Angeles, CA, about a week before Lauren arrived (Fig. 4.1).

While we had planned out our travel around India down to the hour, we had only vaguely talked about getting our mothers to tell us their stories. We didn't have much of a plan except to ask them about their childhoods. Over two hot afternoons, we sat with our mothers in my mother's apartment, drinking hot chai and doing laundry. We, the "academics", the scholars (so we thought!), one a professor of media literacy (Lauren) and the other a professor of elementary education (me) (Fig. 4.2).

We invited them to talk more with each other than to us, in answering our open-ended questions. The focus of this project was cultural but also political and beyond—a way to navigate our understandings of *who* we are, *where* we came from, and *who* we became as well as could become. We were especially interested in their stories as women from the last century and us as millennial cuspers. We were interested in their opinions and feelings not just about what life was like in their shoes, but also what life is like now that they see us live our lives in our times. Interestingly, we found many similarities when it came to their roles as women—while one was a home-maker, the other worked part-time outside the home, and yet they



Fig. 4.1 Radha and Sandy in India, 2017



Fig. 4.2 Lauren and Ambika in Bellingham, 2013. We were tenured Full Professors!



Fig. 4.3 Radha and Sandy, Hyderabad, 2017: deep in conversation

both were primarily responsible for raising the kids, after-school sports, activities, school-related activities, and home chores like cleaning, dishes, shopping, dinner, laundry, and so on (Figs. 4.3, 4.4, 4.5, and 4.6).

There were also poignant life event similarities as each woman shared about caring for their spouse during their respective prolonged illnesses (one with kidney failure and the other with cancer), and how their spouse's eventual deaths affected them and their lives. What was amazing throughout were their attitudes and finding common ground through emotion, even though they both spoke different languages. Their stories were insightful, inspirational, and above all powerful. We, the daughters, had much to learn. In the following transcript, we stayed true to how they told their stories with only some coaxing from us. Especially, Radha's story is kept in the way she said it without any changes. As Radha is multi-lingual (she fluently speaks over six languages and can read and write fluently in four), sometimes she "literal" translates expressions in English which may sound grammatically different.

- Ambika: “So Sandy and Radha (sorry, Amma), we want to know a little about your early childhood. Tell us where you grew up and how many siblings you had. And a little bit about your life.”
- Lauren: “What years were you born and where and where you grew up?”
- Ambika: (laughs) “They’re pointing to each other.” (As Sandy and Radha looked at each other for the other to begin)
- Lauren: “And speak as loud as you can” (having put her I-phone on the table in front of them)
- Sandy: I was born in 1943 in Miami Florida. Um I have one brother who is two years younger than I am. And I grew up in the Florida Keys, in Marathon to be specific. And then we came back up to Miami when I was in the 8th grade. So, it was very primitive on the Keys then. We had electricity then, but we had a big cistern to collect water because we didn’t have running water. Despite all that it was fun. We didn’t have any entertainment to speak of. We just played outside and swam and went fishing.
- Sandy: We didn’t have movies or even have a hospital then. So, you better not get sick. But we did have fun. I was forced to play with my brother because there was nobody else.

Fig. 4.4 How Marathon, FL may have been like in 1943 from Google pictures

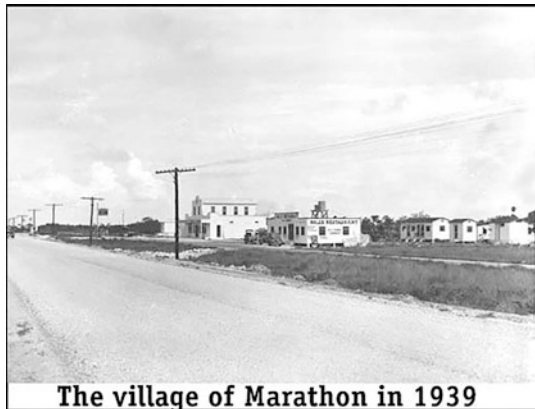


Fig. 4.5 Sandy with her brother in 1947



Fig. 4.6 The main street in Shencottah, India, 1943 from Google pictures



Radha: I am Radha. I was born in India—South India. I was born in Shencottah, that place is very close to Cape Comorin the south most tip of India. The town I was born on the border of the states of Kerala and Tamil Nadu. I have three brothers and two sisters. I am the youngest in my family. 1938, I was born.

Lauren: You both were born in the southern most tip of your countries!

We all laughed at this surprising fact! Lauren paused her I-phone to check if the recording was understandable. As we had not really planned this in any formal way, we didn't carry with us any formal recording device. And that is the way we wanted to keep it anyhow, given the motive of this storying. That is, we wanted our mothers to share about their past. We, the daughters, were more interested in how the dynamics between the two of them would play out.

When we each first broached the subject to them individually, of learning about their individual lives through this storying, both responded with some surprise and in the case of my mother, mild ridiculousness of the whole thing. I remember she asked, "Why am I important?" "Why would you want to know *my* story?" or "What do you want me to say?" "I had a normal average life, why would that be interesting?" I think Lauren reported something along the same lines as well adding that her mother said, "There's really nothing special to report about my life". Nevertheless, they both indulged us, and for that, we were thankful.

Both Lauren and I were the only daughter, and in Lauren's case, she was an only child. I had two older brothers, although there was a large age gap of seven years between us.

My Amma, in My Eyes (Ambika)

My mother was the youngest of six children and I was her youngest. From stories that I have heard about her, I knew I was a lot like her. Defiant, independent, cared deeply about justice and doing the right thing. But she was the poet, the writer, the maker of songs for all weddings, the singer who lulled me to sleep with her melodious voice. Living in a foreign country, (Malaysia), as the wife of an up and coming finance executive (my father), she told me stories of hosting "cocktail parties", going to corporate "dinners", learning to eat with a fork and spoon. Although she could rarely eat anything at these dinners as people then didn't understand what being vegan meant! She regaled me with stories of learning English by watching "I Love Lucy", "I dream of Jeannie", "The Andy Griffith Show", and more—shows I had never seen until I saw reruns when I came here as a graduate student more than 30 years later! She was also a rising star vocalist giving professional concerts in Indian classical music (Carnatic music), in and around Kuala Lumpur. Once, I vaguely remember her telling me that she had to stop her musical career because she had three children to look

after now. Growing up, my mother would let slip her musings about her relationship with me. For example, she has always (seemingly) derided me for my independence in various ways. “Don’t laugh so loudly” or “Right . . ., you know everything right from when you were born don’t you?!” or “You are lucky we allowed you to go out by yourself” or “Please behave like a girl!”, and so on. Please note that these were often said in jest or love and sometimes even in admiration. Further, they were said in Tamil, my language, and don’t really translate well. And yet, growing up in India, I was afforded so much freedom as a girl because of my parents’ belief of not differentiating between my brothers and I. To contextualize this for you, the reader, it was the 1980s and I was in a southern city in India. Going to the movies, or even out to dinner wasn’t a thing yet. The city we lived in—Hyderabad—had a large Muslim population and a rather conservative Hindu population. Girls from respectable families did not wear pants, skirts, or t-shirts. Women generally wore a loose tunic with harem pants (called Salwar Kameez) or Sarees. I believe I was the only girl amongst all my peers and friends in any context to have learned how to swim as a teenage girl. And it was my mother who took me to these classes, waited and sat outside the pool watching me the whole time. She’d say “I became so dark and tanned because of you!” As a teenager, I rode my bicycle all over my neighborhood, and later an electric motorbike everywhere as a young woman. I had a few pairs of “pedal-pushers”, wore my brothers’ t-shirts in the rather conservative city I grew up in. There was never any questions about me bringing boys home as friends or later choosing my own spouse. For these freedoms, I am thankful. In fact, I don’t think I realized these were freedoms afforded to me or that I was any different than other girls until much later.

My Mother (Lauren)

I grew up as a very typical suburban kid in Columbus, Ohio, in the United States. The suburb where I grew up, Upper Arlington, had a reputation for being where the “rich” families lived. It was quite close to downtown, but also bordered the university and was occupied mainly by doctors, lawyers, and professors. My parents were none of those things, and as such, we lived on the “fringe” of the community—within the boundary so I could attend the UA schools, but just far enough away from the country club to live in an affordable house. My father was a journalist, and my mother a dental hygienist. It

was unusual for mothers in my suburb to work, and I admired my mom for that.

My mom was never like all the other moms. After graduating high school at 16, and playing college basketball, she had an independent spirit that she carries with her through today. I remember the day of my senior prom; my mom decided to be crafty and sew my prom dress for me from scratch. I thought it might be a stretch for her skill set but went with it anyway. As my date sat in the living room waiting, there I was, upstairs with my mom as she tried to get the zipper attached to the back of the dress! She made it work, but she cut it pretty close (literally and figuratively). Regardless her domestic skills, she was incredibly supportive of me growing up, always encouraging me to try new things and do my very best. As I am nowhere near as athletic as either of my parents were, I always felt as if I let them down in some ways; however, what I lacked on the playing field I made up for by doing well in school, and being very intellectually curious, a gift I received from both of my parents. To this day, my mother continues to support me and now my daughter.

After a short break where we replenished on chai, some snacks, and checking the recording device, we resumed our story with Sandy and Radha.

Sandy: My dad managed a wholesale fish company. And it was part of the family business. That's why we moved down there in the first place.

Radha: My father he was an engineer. Civil engineer so he has been transferred from place to place so many times. We moved a lot. So, my eleven years of school up to high school, I have studied in sixteen schools because my father got transferred from one place to another one place to another one place. *laughs* And some places we were only there six months and then he will be transferred. That's how I studied. Eleven years in sixteen places.

Radha pauses and looks at us. I coax her on, remembering details that Sandy had given (Figs. 4.7 and 4.8).

Ambika: What was your life like? Like Sandy said, she had electricity but no running water. She had to play with her brother.

Radha: When I was born there was no electricity in my town but when I was 4 or 5 years old we got an electric connection from a warehouse where my father built our house. I have seen many

people who don't have an electric light because they can't afford to get the power. So, they used to use the lights with the kerosene and use that light.

Sandy: Lanterns. We had those. Like the hurricane lamps.
 Radha: (Nodding affirmation at Sandy) And according to my siblings, I am the luckiest in my family. Because in that time, my father was earning more. So I have all the luxuries in my life. Better than my older brothers. (Laughs) When I was born my father bought a car but each town where my father was working, the school was not far away and we used to walk to the school. Once in a while when my father was passing by that way, he would bring us by car. Otherwise, we always go by walking to our school. I studied in Kerala language that is Malayalam. That is the language of Kerala. I studied in that till the British rule was in India, there was some English schools and all until 1947. But I studied in Malayalam when I was six years old. They didn't have kindergarten and all. There was some kind of a preschool but that's all. We lived in a joint [combined, multigenerational] family so we don't have any daycare center. Because always we have grandparents or aunties and uncles to



Fig. 4.7 Radha and her sisters, maybe 1948

look after us and so we don't have to go to any preschool. We always have help at home. I remember radio and all. We got it first before everyone else in town, because my father was earning more as a civil engineer. The others, they come and sit in our house and listen to some music and I remember all these luxuries when I was old enough to remember things. Because my father was very particular [i.e. detail-oriented]. He retired in 1955. He retired when he was 55 years old. He was born in 1900. So, in 1955 he retired. In our village there was college at that time. I haven't gone to any university. But I have finished high school. And in big cities within Kerala itself, they have good universities and colleges, but my father didn't want us to go stay in hostels

Lauren: He didn't want his daughters to be away from him.

Radha: (Nods towards Lauren) He sent his sons. He was ready to send his sons to hostels but his daughters he was protecting so much. So, we didn't have the chance to go to college but after I married, I got married at 22 years old. I got married to Gopal, Ambika's dad, and then that time I had to somehow

Fig. 4.8 Radha in 1958—studio picture to solicit an arranged marriage



converse in English [referring to moving away] so I took classes and after I had learned how to speak English. Before I had known how to read and write [in school] but after these complications came [referring to managing on her own in a foreign country not knowing the language]. Because of his job, wherever he went I was like, ok that is my life (laughs). [referring to how she followed wherever her husband was] still now I haven't had any problems with financial problems [Referring to how her father, then her husband took care of her needs financially]

We were all so involved in Radha's story, including Sandy, who was just listening. We checked on the laundry and continued on, eager to now listen to Sandy. While Radha had just spoken about her missed opportunity to go to college as her father was "protective", Sandy had finished school early and went to college (Fig. 4.9).

Lauren: Okay now you (Sandy), talk about your education and what you did right after because you graduated early.

Sandy: (rather nonchalantly) Yes, I did.

Lauren: (Clearly proud of her mother) Talk a little about that

Sandy: I was just going to say something about luxuries we had [As Radha had just spoken about how she had been taken care of]

Lauren: Go ahead.

Sandy: When we were living on the Keys we didn't have any television. And we didn't get TV until 1956 when we moved back up to Miami. We had a radio. So, we would all get together and listen to the different radio shows. Like the shadow and Lone Ranger. And the series things. And we thought that was great at the time. We did get electricity later and we also got running water. It was very exciting. It also meant we had to take more baths! (laughs) And then as far as school, one of the reasons we moved back up to Miami in 1956 was because there was no high school in Marathon on the Keys and we would have had to be bused to Key west and my dad didn't want us to have to do that because it was dangerous. So, we decided to move

back up to Miami, so I could go to High school. And I did graduate early from high school I was sixteen. And I went on to college.

Lauren: Why did you graduate early from high school? Was it because you were super smart?

Sandy: No, I skipped a grade.

Ambika: Which grade did you skip?

Sandy: Second.

Ambika: Oh, why?

Sandy: Because we moved down to the keys then and I was too far ahead of the kids in the classroom and so they moved me.

Ambika: Oh, so it was because you were super smart.

Sandy: No, the education was just better [in Miami].

It was funny how both Radha and Sandy were downplaying their achievements (Brown et al., 1998). This, in Lauren's and Ambika's gender equity minded, feministic worlds, was not right! But they were having none of it. Radha projecting her father's refusal to acknowledge his daughters' intelligence as diligence through his mandated no-college or even high school rule as being "particular" and taking care of details. And Sandy insisting that the schools were better in Miami hence she was ahead, it had nothing to do with her intellect! Lauren and I exchanged looks as we let them continue.

Lauren: (Indicating her mother) Let's start with the college part

Sandy: So, I graduate from high school in 1960 and then I went away to college in West Virginia. I wanted to study dental hygiene. And there was no dental hygiene program in Florida at the time. There was no dental school, so I went away to West Virginia which was supposed to be a good school. And I also graduated a little early there. I was 19 when I graduated. I got a BS degree in Dental hygiene. It was a good choice at the time. There weren't too many choices. It was difficult for women to get into engineering or any other field. It was basically nursing or teaching, and I didn't want to do either of those.

Fig. 4.9 Sandy in 1963



- Ambika: Nursing or teaching were the only choices that you had.
- Sandy: Yeah. So, then I got married. I met my husband in college and we got married shortly after that in 1963.
- Lauren: And how old were you when you got married?
- Sandy: Twenty Two. And then I ... wait no ... [Lauren and Sandy debate for a few minutes about how Sandy was when she got married!]
- Lauren: You were 20. If you were born in 1943 then you were 20 in 1963.
- Sandy: I guess you're right. Yes, that's correct. So, you wanted to know about the political climate?
- Lauren: Yes.
- Sandy: So, when I was still in high school the schools were still segregated. Everything was still segregated.
- Ambika: I'm just going to explain what segregated means to my mother. I am sure she knows but she doesn't know the term. Amma, segregated means blacks and white people were separated. You know how in American history black people could not go to the same schools, eat in the same restaurants. ... So that kind of thing is called segregation and so she means that this was still happening.

Radha nods to show she understood (Figs. 4.10 and 4.11).

Fig. 4.10 Sandy in Miami, 1968



Fig. 4.11 Radha in Kuala Lumpur, 1965



Sandy: Yeah. I think it was in 1960 when everything began to change after I graduated from high school and then they had everyone—everyone was together after that.

Lauren: They were segregated in your class, right?

Sandy: Oh, yeah. That was probably the biggest thing that happened while I was in high school as far as that kind of thing [referring to the civil rights movement all over the United States at the time]

We turned and looked at Radha and waited for her to comment on the political climate she grew up

Radha: What do I say?

Ambika: You can talk about the politics right after we got our freedom from the British, Amma. How did that affect you? What did you see around you?

Radha: I was too young. I was seven or eight years old. [India got freedom from British rule on August 15, 1947]

Ambika: I am sure you remember things on the radio and things that you were hearing and listening, if you remember. In the 1950s there was the Pakistan-Indian War so that was pretty major. Anything that affected you or your family?

Radha: I can't remember those things. I didn't—we never went that deep into politics in those days because we were children. You know as children don't know anything. Maybe depending on each circumstance too. I told you I haven't went through any difficulties in my life.

Ambika: So, you lived a sheltered life. And therefore, didn't know . . .

Radha: I don't know the difficulties because I never had to face them.

Ambika: (Explaining to Lauren and Sandy) Also, perhaps because she was in the deep south of India. And because my grandfather was pretty well off, he wasn't the middle class or the lower middle class. He was a white collar worker, he was an engineer and things like that. Perhaps life was easier for them than if my father were alive he would have had a pretty different story. (referring to the fact that my father's family struggled financially for many years)

Radha: Yes, my husband, he has many different siblings, and my father in law didn't have a very good job and all.

Ambika: They were not very well of.

Radha: No, so even through his education and all, my husband, he was giving tuition while going to college.

Ambika: Right from when he was in high school, my dad would coach math, he would tutor the other kids in math and the money he got from that he would pay . . .

Radha: He would pay his tuition fee.

Ambika: He would pay his tuition fee because schools weren't free.

Radha: His father could not support the family.

- Ambika: He was the only one who went to college amongst his siblings.
- Lauren: How many siblings?
- Ambika: My dad had four brothers and three sisters.
- Radha: So seven including him.
- Lauren: Wow!
- Ambika: And he was the only one who went to college because he tutored other kids to pay for it. So he had a very different life from my mother.
- Radha: He was having a lot of financial problems which I don't have. But he was well qualified, so my father chose this arranged marriage for me. So, my father decided that this man is the best to look after me—my father decided. So, I was quite happy, even now. He earned money and put so much money in the bank I can be fine financially. But for all the other support I need my children. (laughs) No I don't remember much about the politics.

It appeared that my mother kept going back to the men in her life and the patriarchal trope of men taking care of women. In an effort to bring the topic back to my mother's experiences, I asked her to think about politics again. However, Lauren was excited that my father's experiences also seemed to have similarities with her father's and so the topic changed again.

- Ambika: Anything about politics or anything you can tell us about Amma? Did the politics affect you in anyway? Or do you remember about it? If you don't it's okay.
- Radha: I don't.
- Lauren: Let's let my mother say about. ... Mom do you want to say anything about how dad grew up because he was in a different class.
- Sandy: Okay, yeah, my husband's background. ... His was very different than mine. He grew up in a small town in western Pennsylvania and his father was a coal miner, so they didn't have as many luxuries as we did. They lived in the coal mining housing, they had the housing for the men and families and he played a lot of sports and they had activities for them and everything. But his family grew up having difficulties. He was the first in his family to go to college.

- Lauren: What was the education level of his parents?
 Sandy: I think both of my husband's parents went to school through the eighth grade.
 Lauren: I thought his dad had went through the fourth grade, but she went through the eighth grade.
 Sandy: Yeah, she went through the eighth grade.
 Lauren: I thought she went through high school.

The topic quickly changed to our fathers and their families—Lauren and my grandparents. Sandy and Radha launched into a long dialogue about their respective mother and father-in-laws with Lauren and I interjecting. Our mothers seemed very excited and began animatedly talking with each other about how difficult life was like for their spouses when they were young. They shared about their spouses being first-generation college students and how they were both not only self-made men but made it possible for their families, that is Sandy and Radha to have a comfortable life. The conversation continued during lunch but we had stopped recording. At one point Radha and Sandy realized that they had both watched the after math of President Kennedy's assassination live on television. The talked about how saddened they both were when it happened. Radha especially empathized with Jackie Kennedy's predicament as she was a mother of two young children by then.

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

We had started with grand intentions of doing an oral history (Gluck & Patai, 1991) of our mothers and soon realized that it became a storying dialogue among the four of us animatedly talking and sharing as we realized so many similarities and points of connections in our lives (Silverman, 2000). While we didn't formally ask the following questions in these words, the information we wanted our mothers to tell us were based on these (Fig. 4.12):

- Tell us a little bit about your life as you were growing up.
- What was your schooling like? Did you go to college?
- What was your life like as a young adult and beyond?
- Did any political or world happenings have an impact on you? If so how?

Fig. 4.12 Sandy and her family, 1969



We realized that like many women, our mothers' lives were deeply entangled with their respective husbands' lives. They had both been married to men who were self-made, first-gen college graduates, who had high-profile jobs and professional careers. Both Radha and Sandy had compromised their talents and wishes to be domestic supports to their respective husbands. Radha who was very talented as a classical vocalist and Sandy who always wanted to be a dental hygienist and perhaps could have been a dentist given her intellectual acumen. Lauren and I wondered, were we like that? Did we compromise? It was incredible the grace and dignity with which both women held up their husbands' lives even unto death as they cared for them during their prolonged illnesses. There was a certain stoicism that we, the daughters, noticed in our mothers when they spoke about their husbands' illnesses. Sandy who cared for her husband's battle with cancer and Radha who cared for her husband with renal failure spending seven months in the ICU. The sheer strength of character of our mothers was admirable indeed (Fig. 4.13).

While we, the daughters, had more freedom and independence in choosing our own paths in our lives, there was something commendable



Fig. 4.13 Radha and her family, 1974

and admirable about our mothers' resilience (Hartstock, 2019; Smyth & Sweetman, 2015). Today, both Sandy and Radha are independent women, active on social media, who keep up with politics, current affairs, and still read voraciously. We are humbled by our mothers.

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