

DESI DREAMS IN AMERICA

Sri Craven
Portland State University
cravens@pdx.edu

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About the Author

Sri Craven received her PhD in English and Women's Studies from the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor. She is Professor of Women, Gender, and Sexuality Studies at Portland State University, Oregon, USA. She studies and teaches literary and cultural discourses of identity and identity politics globally. Her academic publications center the challenges of identity's use as an epistemological category and can be found in *The Bloomsbury Handbook of World Theory*, *Routledge Handbook of Asian Diaspora and Development*, and *Transformations: Journal of Inclusive Scholarship and Pedagogy*. Her creative publications draw attention to life in culture as a series of contradictory experiences of power, persecution, and agency, and have appeared in *Meridians: Feminism, Race, Transnationalism* (USA, twice), and *Weber: The Contemporary West* (USA, twice).

You ask me why I'm here, doc. Does one call you that? Your success rate must want to make you weep! What's the score—95-5 against? Worse? Ooh, your calm is exciting! How does a beautiful brown woman like you end up in a place like this? I mean, the crazy ward at the VA hosp is a rare endpoint to a life spent in Spelling Bee and AP classes, Ivy Leagues and no dating. Happy to tell you why I'm here, but it might be boring as fuck, I promise you. You might not want a second date, doc. Ha ha, no offense. Think of it as crip wit. Ah, you smile! You're encouraging me to, what's that, *tell my story*. Or, do I interest you in *other ways*? Ooh, a crip can hope!

It really all started with an oops, I did it again moment. In moments like this, I tend to call into being my three big heroes—Philip Roth, Gloria Steinem, and Britney Spears—lining them up on my cruddy couch, like so many an awkward high school party I've been to. Phil looked decidedly encumbered, Stein gorgeously angry, and Britney, well, what can I say, that girl always looks like a luscious suburban soccer mom who just realized after the marital bust up that the ex has absolutely no money. Like me, doc, Britney always looks like she's falling off of the end of the world. But Phil, he reminds me where the world is—in the bedrooms of pubescent boys fantasizing about what they need, but too afraid to name it. Gloria dares me to find the world, making me want to weep and whoop. Isn't that the kind of contradiction that you're going to help me figure out, doc?

Anyway, this holy triumvirate was helping me get through the fact that I was basically laying there in a pool of my own puke and probably piss after another night's bender with some of Scotland's finest, unable to move. This cripple had fallen off his Batmobile, AKA army-issued high-tech wheelchair. And, he was all fucking alone in his apartment, heavily subsidized by his country—aren't I a lucky motherfucker? My iPhone lay to my right, which was good. I had to call my dyke sister, which was bad. I say "dyke" with all fondness, doc, despite my sister's injunction that you don't actually use that word unless you *are* one. I often tell her that I love lesbians. She usually comes back with the less generous, "Then wear a gaff." My sister! With her delectable true desi girlfriend, one of those old film types—buxom is the word they use for women like her. The kind of films I truly liked and got into even if I, an American brat, had never lived, unlike our parents, in the old country, in the old times. The kind of beauty that makes me want to weep with the unfairness of it all. If you can't trust a buxom true Indian beauty to be straight, then who or what can you trust? To which my dyke sister usually says, "Nothing, shitface. That's the whole lesson." Ah, my desi dreams in America, eviscerated, as always, by my only sibling, pediatric surgeon extraordinaire, probable desi homecoming queen of Orange County that year I returned from no-man's land, if only she wasn't so hellbent on being so bent.

That day was the one-year anniversary of my return from a tour of doo-dy in Ghastly-stan. Four years to the day since I was a would-be, wannabe quack at Berkeley, which I left to join Uncle Sam's band of brethren fighting for democracy and freedom everywhere! Before you think otherwise, I couldn't give two shits about America, doc. Or the American Dream. But, you see, back then, I needed time to learn how to grow a pair. To tell our father that all I want is to teach high school math and marry a desi girl out of some small village in *Bharat*, and watch her blossoming into something larger than life in tight jeans and a red *bindi*—beautiful, sexy, and indecent in the US of A. I want to live in the inner city, not the fucking 'burbs, and raise darkie children, and live a laidback life with lots of slacker friends. I want to play music and have block parties where everyone's wives wear floral printed dresses with lots of cleavage, and cook spicy food and laugh loudly. I want to watch my own curly headed moppets run circles around their mother, who meanwhile proudly, flagrantly flirts with my best buddy, and looks my way with desire in her coal black eyes. Dang, doc, I have a hard-on just thinking about it! Surely, you'll forgive me? I went to Berkeley not to become a medico, but to summon up the guts to say all this to my parents—no, my father. When that didn't work, I sought out the army to become, trite as this might sound, the man I couldn't be. But what's that saying stolen mercilessly from our culture by this culture? Oh yes, karma is a bitch. One year in, instead of the killing fields or the inner city, there I was on the floor of a shitty apartment, crippled, lonely, and desperate, well within range of Orange fucking County, a place closer to Ghastly-stan than you'd think, doc.

Laying in my own upchuck, I watched Phil rising ominously every now and then, only to sit back down. Britney filing her nails, bored, snapping gum. Gloria, ah, gorgeous, glorious Gloria, sitting there with her glasses on her nose, looking down on me. Or was it at? Since I couldn't tell, I crawled to my phone. I listened to the dyke's phone ring a long time before it went to voicemail. I may have sniffled a little. I knew, no matter what, the dyke is programmed both by genes and by profession to come to my aid. I consoled myself because neither Britney nor Gloria were about to do it. And, Phil was . . . well, he is just a man . . .

We have a routine, doc, the sibling and I. Each time I go on a bender, she comes over, cleans me up, clothes me, feeds me, yells at me, and leaves me. Except for that last action, there is no particular order to the others. That day, she arrived after a brutal rotation in emergency pediatrics and throned me back, albeit with my manhood barely intact. These lesbians have an instinct, doc, and, boy, do they go for it! The balls, I mean. She swore on her noble profession that if I do it again, I'd wallow in my own shit till the public works department would have to come and dig me out. Ah, she's adorable. A trifle melodramatic, like all the aunties we know, right? But so adorable, this little sister I remember so wee and wan . . . Oh,

yes, maybe this is a good time to tell you—yours truly does not speak to the male parental unit, leaving all the aunties and uncles in desi-dom aghast at such blatant disregard for one's culture, a culture in which parents are to be venerated. This is what happens when you raise your children in California, says our maternal uncle, living a stone's throw from Ellis Island with his dusky daughters and curvy wife, and all the other tired, poor, and wretched. But, never mind what you do or don't do, like the aunties say, "Aaal suffrings must be bo-rrenn, no? It yiss fate wonly!" To which the dyke frequently said: *Fuck this shit.*

Then the dyke landed the reason she was done with me. She was getting hitched in a week! Why was I even surprised! She had beaten me to everything, so why not this? This girl child, infinitely better than I could ever be at every damn thing, including wooing girls! Oh, you'll weep for me when I tell you this, doc: her future wife is the kind of dusky goddess my desi soul has yearned for since before I was a thing in my mother's imagination. The white girls may have had my body many a time over the years, doc, but, hell, brown girls have my very soul, my karmic lifetimes. I'm happy for the sib, though. "Less competition," I told her, adding that she was risking the ways of all the men of the world, because not only is her bae unemployed, doc, she is also not American, which makes it impossible for her to get a job that would actually pay anything. The girl is an eternal student, has been for the three years she's been making love to my sister, and about half a dozen before that. That's a record, doc! Nine years and counting of reliably and ably squeezing the grand educational institutions of this country in return for teaching all about fighting capitalism. My future sister-in-law, the living epitome of shafting capitalism with its own . . . tsk, tsk, must we resort to phallic metaphors here in discussing lesbian revolution—I think not. If my sister faltered at my male commiseration, it was only for a minute before devastating me with, "Yeah, but with more consistent sex!" Then she landed another one on me heartlessly, giving me no time to even finish flinching—these surgeons are like that. She wanted me to officiate.

Thus departed my baby sister, but not before emptying out every single bottle in my shoddy abode. No amount of wheeling and dealing changed that. In the post-haze of being back on the wagon, doc, I noticed Britney rolling her eyes in that luscious way of white girls in corn-fed America, the ones who trolled our dorms at Berkeley and gave it away for absolutely free. Phil, however, had disappeared. Men! Ever tried going on the wagon cold turkey, doc? It's like having your limbs hacked to save your life. I should know. Suddenly, glorious Gloria, whose pictures we wanked off to in high school—the real feminists always turn on the real men, we said—lambent Gloria leaned over, touched my shoulder. It awakened the Hemingway in me. I badly wanted another drink. And a gun. I wanted a sunset and some hills. I wanted, above all, strong women around me. Gloria, Virginia, Gertrude, Camilla. History has proven that only strong women matter. The beauties—Marilyn, Audrey,

Diana—carefully aided by an industry more profitable than war even . . . beauty . . . history has proven that they do not, I repeat, *do not* hold up well. Show me a beauty and I'll show you a wreck, we said as we lay in the dorms, and hid in the ditches. Nah, doc, men don't want what you think we want. We want strength. So, yes, give me Gloria, give me steely-eyed Camilla, with depths that ol' boy Charlie has plumbed, and not just in that way you're surely thinking! Who's the real sexist here, huh, doc?

When it happened a mere few days later, the dyke's wedding was mos def *not* the Bollywood affair favored by us desis. It was not a three-day thing with horses and singing at which someone's uncle leered at someone's niece, or his own, and husbands gazed longingly upon the delicious cleavages of women not their wives, and wives walked around proud as peacocks because how does it matter if men look, the deeds to their Orange County mansions are safely under their names. The dyke sister had to make do with a shoddy ceremony led by a shaking sibling, while all the lefty friends of her curvaceous wife-to-be threw rice at the newlyweds in flagrant contravention of their professed hatred of the institution of marriage.

The wedding was a bone-dry affair. Not a drop in sight. My nerves were shot. Whether from not having had a drop for several days, or from my piss poor performance as the head honcho of the ceremony, or something else infinitely more troubling . . . I did not know. If Ghastly-stan taught me anything, it taught me the value of that sixth sense. Something just did not feel right, doc. But, without a drink, I could not put it to words. I tell ya, if I'd had a drink, you and I would not be consorting right now. Again, no offence. I see your struggle, doc, but I'm not loathsome, just lonely for a strong woman who is not my sister. But, ya' see, this is what happens when your family is . . . well, you probably guessed something's up, and that it'll all eventually come out in the washed-up antics of this male Scheherazade with zero charm. You're probably sick of me by now, this insufferable quasi-misogynist hiding his loathsome nature under war wounds and a silver tongue? Your face is so sad, doc! You are sad for me, as though I were dead wrong! See? This is why I like women, doc. So much better for a broken world!

The dyke was definitively awkward around me. Perhaps she felt guilty about the booze, but, in reality, probably because she was deathly afraid that I'd turn into a giant size embarrassment and/or burden. I wondered about the guest list. Not a single female of the species was remotely interested in being wooed by a cripple in uniform. I had come to the gig decked out. My Medal of Honor aimed directly outward like Madonna's beautiful conical bra. But desi girls, tsk, tsk, they only want a guy fully *intact*, if you know what I mean, doc. Now, don't you go thinking dirty thoughts again, and me a cripple, shame on you! In *that* department, doc, I might not have a problem, but woe is me, no one to help me prove it. So, there I

was, with nothing to do but swivel myself out to the porch where exotic flowers warred with plebian ivy and money plants on a balmy California evening. That's when I saw our father.

He is not a big man, this father of ours. But he stands straight and tall. This man from the old country of fearsome gods, who has since made it in America. This man who was once a lonely dark-skinned graduate student with a thick accent who outranked every fellow student. This stellar chemist whose research made millions for his company, but who was never allowed to become a leader because he was unintelligible to investors. This man of intelligence, perpetually investing in things, money, his children, but never quite made it in his own eyes. This man whose desi dreams in America are shattered by his own—a cripple son who dropped out of med school, and a lesbian daughter whose med school success means nothing because she will not marry a man. He has said this to us *wover* and *wover* again—his accent *is* rather funny!

That day, our father marched up the driveway, pushed past the door. I wheeled back in, and saw him walk with purpose toward my baby sister. I'd heard it all before. It's fucking boring, really, like I told you at the beginning. I could bet my life he was there with yet another lecture about all the things the sib was doing wrong, that her brother had done wrong. Another drawn out diatribe about how he could abide his suffering at the hands of these “idiot Americans,” but not his “*wown chil-drun*,” who belong to a culture “as old as *ta-yuhm*,” and who could have been everything he couldn't here in America because of the sacrifices he had made. All I could think of was his famous response to my return, “Now, you will never be *yennything* at *aal*, *aal* my hard work has come to nothing! And, for what? This country, which has given me so little, and taken too much.”

So, when I saw him standing before my sister, I found my army-issued gun in my hand at hip level, which is a lot lower than you can imagine when you have no legs, and are seated. Without the booze, my mind was foggy, but my aim was . . . well, that's how I got my two buddies out of the mess a year ago in Ghastlystan. It had been a no-win situation that I turned into a *semi* win. The five fuckers who ambushed us were all dead, and we three survived. Albeit in various stages of dismemberment.

This time, though, I was dead wrong. My aim . . . well . . . it was less than stellar. You probably have all this in your notes, eh, doc? I know you know that my little sister headed then to triage, lowering my arm, and wheeling me into another room and locking me in. I know you know that she brought me here to your doorstep, doc. What you don't know is that through that door that day, I heard the old man bawling. He kept saying *wover* and *wover* again—ha ha, sorry, doc, it's too good

to resist—he kept intoning, “It’s my karma! It’s my *karma*! My *woahn* flesh and blood, *yaiming* at me. It’s what I deserve for deserting my *woahn* father, my *woahn* home . . .” My father, who worked his ass off, only to feel it went nowhere. American brat that I am, I realized then that all this talk about free will doesn’t matter. Karma is not causality in a single realm. Work hard, get ahead—fuck that shit, to quote the sib out of context. My father’s father, his father, perhaps his father before him, it’s a long chain of sorrows and hopes and failures. My sister’s antidote is to do what can be done in the now. Mine . . . well, mine is to enthusiastically imagine that which might never be.

So, in that room on my sister’s wedding day, shaking from the absence of my elixir and my pathetic attempt at patricide, only the return to my teenage fantasy saved me from doing harm to myself, doc. I allowed myself to fully imagine Gloria straddling my waist. Britney standing next to us in a cute nurse’s outfit, popping gum. Phil watching this orgiastic scene, bony fingers cupping a gaunt face. And, then, just like that, I finally understood karma. Here in America, you dream of a dark young beauty and your own little brood, but you go after someone else in some dimwit hope of belonging. You get an old Jewish man watching your excess because he understands how you hide your uneasy sense of foreignness. And, suspended between here and there, your father and his father, now and back when, you learn that life is a cosmic battlefield, that no war is new, that your hardest-won battle is the one that comes after you lose your aim. Surely, doc, isn’t this the beginning of all healing?