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## Farewell Mother

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### Keywords

*Immigrants*  
*Community-based*  
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### Abstract

This article is a performance poetry piece that describes my experiences of loss at my mother's death. Specifically, the article draws attention to how an immigrant's grief can be further compounded by having to bid farewell to their loved ones from a land that is far away from their home country where the death of their loved one occurs. Immigration/work status intersects with socioeconomic status to create barriers to the individual's ability to travel home to partake in their loved one's funeral rites. In light of current immigration flows to Canada such conversations are essential to create grief interventions that are timely and culturally appropriate.

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I can vividly recall that moment in time when I saw my mother for the very last time at the Mumbai airport in India. Looking at my mother's teary and frightened eyes I promised her that one day soon I would come 'home' and take her back with me to Canada. I was leaving my beloved motherland, India, to travel abroad so I could be free from the prison of patriarchy that had imprisoned me for years in my fathers' home. By bringing my mother to Canada I would also set my mother free from the mayhem that surrounded her every waking moment in my fathers' house. Year after year following my arrival in Canada as a young woman of colour, I struggled to survive financially and psychologically, all alone in a foreign land. For the first seven years in Canada my immigration status went through several transformations – student, non-status immigrant and foreign worker – until I finally achieved my landed immigration status or permanent residency in the late 1990's. For me it meant that my mission of bringing my mother to Canada was closer. No longer did I need to be afraid that I would be sent back to Mumbai. I could pursue a career of my liking. Soon after attaining my permanent residency I phoned my mother: "Mama, I just need to make enough money to get a decent apartment and a plane ticket so that you can come to Canada." Another year went by. I was still living in a bachelor apartment and working hard to pay off my immigration debts. I was in a hurry to upgrade my human and social capital skills so I could find a job that would help me get an apartment that would be comfortable for my mother and me and save enough money to buy her a plane ticket.

On one fateful winter afternoon a phone call from my brother abruptly ended my dreams that were entangled with my mother's tears. In a sorrowful tone, my brother announced, "Mama died last night." I collapsed to the ground. How could she be dead? I could still hear her laughter when I had called her a month ago to wish her a happy birthday on her 59<sup>th</sup> year. Three weeks prior to her death, while visiting my brother in the Middle East, my mother was diagnosed with leukaemia. During chemotherapy she went into respiratory failure.

I could not go home for my mother's funeral. I couldn't afford the plane ticket. Besides, I was only given two days off from work to grieve for my mother. This was the company's standard practise for all their employees. However, most employees had parents/family that lived within driving distance. It would take me two days just to get to India. I was afraid to jeopardize my newly obtained landed immigration status. Those long periods of surviving as a 'non-status' immigrant had physically and mentally taken its toll on me.

I sat in my apartment and pictured my mother dressed like a 'suhagan' in a red saree just as she looked when she arrived at my father's home as a young bride. My belief in reincarnation gave me some solace that even though her 'body' would burn on the funeral pyre – purified by Agni, the goddess of fire, her soul would be reborn again. I prayed intensely for thirteen days that her soul would not linger in the realm of the ghosts but travel to the realm of our ancestors.

Four years after my mother's passing, I was granted Canadian Citizenship. I felt 'safe' enough to travel to India. That year I was going to start my doctoral degree with a full Vanier Canada Graduate scholarship. I needed to go home to get closure before beginning my doctoral journey. I wanted to talk with family and friends about my mother's 'last' hours. I wanted to know if she was angry with me for having left home but no one wanted to talk about her death. They had done their grieving. They had moved on. Or perhaps they were angry with me for not attending her funeral. Anyway, I will never know. I gathered some of my mother's clothing and photographs and returned to Canada.

It was in my Masters of Social Work (MSW) study that I first realized that many other immigrants had worn the heavy garment of guilt that I wore for many years after my mother's demise. I must clarify that my MSW study did not deal with the topic of death. The purpose of this study was to explore the gaps in settlement and integration services for recent immigrants to Canada (Sethi, 2009). As I used a Community-based Participatory Research methodology, I had many opportunities to converse with immigrants/refugees during the research process. Every now and then at multicultural meetings I would meet an immigrant who had lost a loved one. They would talk to me about how they were feeling because they couldn't go home to attend their loved one's funeral as a result of their immigration status, financial constraints, fear of losing their job and/or not having anyone to look after their children.

In light of current immigration trends the issue of immigrant grief, specifically; the consequences of 'grieving from far' needs attention. For example, in 2006, Canada experienced the highest level of immigration since 1931; immigrants now comprise 19.8% of the total population with the majority of recent arrivals coming from the non-European regions such as India, China, Middle East and the Philippines (Chui, 2011). My point is that losing someone – family or friend – one holds dear to their heart is a painful experience for anyone regardless of one's gender, culture, ethnicity, or religion. However, from my personal experiences and the conversations that I had with other immigrants/refugees on this matter, it is my contention that immigrants/refugees sometimes have to bear the additional burden of guilt at not being able to travel to another country and be near their loved ones when they are sick or dying. I do acknowledge that even those born in Canada cannot always be close to their loved ones at their last hours on earth or attend their funeral. Nevertheless travelling within Canada to attend someone's funeral is a lot easier than going to China or India.

Further, for people born in Canada they do not have to worry about their immigration status and how leaving the country would affect their citizenship. Not being able to hold my mother's hand when cancer cells attacked her immune system or to partake in the sacred funeral rites to liberate her soul deeply affected my emotional being. The fear of losing my newly obtained immigration status intersected with my socioeconomic status to compound my experiences of loss.

Returning to Canada from India, for the first time in a very long time, I allowed tears to flow unobstructed. I wept for my mother. I wept for myself. I wept for other immigrants who had no other option but to grieve from a land far away. The poems that follow helped me express my grief at the time of my mother's demise. The process of turning my tears into words allowed me to forgive myself. I hope my mother understood why I couldn't come home sooner.....

### **Farewell Mother**

I hope you are not scared, Mama  
when Yama, the God of death  
visits you in your hospital bed.  
I hope you can hold on to my love for you, and  
feel Brahma's presence, all around you.  
I hope you can look at His gentle eyes, and  
take refuge in His wings of Peace.  
I hope you can see beyond Yama's eyes  
to the light of Brahma, your beloved father awaiting your return home.  
I hope you can close your tired eyes  
and let the angels carry you on their wings  
to the land of our ancestors.  
I will pray that a flight of beautiful angels  
travel by your side, reciting Ohm!  
as your soul passes through the valley of death.  
I understand, Mama, that you had to go  
despite the turmoil in my heart  
and all my unfulfilled dreams for you and me.  
I will try to find peace in knowing that you are loved, and  
are safe in Brahma's wings.  
So, farewell beloved mother, farewell.  
Close your eyes and I will sing you a lullaby.  
Do not be afraid, for I will pray that  
when you open your eyes again,  
you will be in the heavenly abode of our ancestors.

The night was long and dark  
when you left your body, and  
began your final journey to the land of our ancestors.  
My soul wept and prayed for thirteen long days that  
Brahma may untangle all the knots of fear that  
imprisoned you on earth, and  
release you from all your karmic debts and,  
give you the gift of Moksha.  
My heart was in turmoil as I struggled to set you free, for I had  
dreams unfulfilled  
letters still to be mailed  
words unspoken  
questions unanswered, and  
a deep yearning within, to hold you in my arms.  
Tears fill my eyes  
as I looked at the picture hanging in my room  
that captured a rare precious moment of my childhood with you.  
I moved my fingers gently over your face  
trying to relive that moment –  
the softness of your saree  
the smell of your perfume  
your long dark hair, and  
your sad eyes.  
Suddenly, a rock of emotions choked me  
and my heart found it hard  
to accept the naked truth  
that I will never see you again, or  
receive another letter/phone call  
asking me to return home.  
It has been long eight years  
when I kissed you good-bye.

But I did not know then, Mama,  
that it was our final farewell.  
And you would be too tired  
to wait for me, to return home.  
I can only hope  
that you remembered in those final moments  
that I have loved you with all my heart.  
And that there will always be a special place in my soul  
that nobody can replace  
and nothing, not even Yama  
can take your memories away from me.

## Glossary

*Landed immigrant or permanent resident* – refers to a person who has been granted the right to live in Canada permanently by immigration authorities (Chui, 2011).

*Suhagan* – a newlywed Hindu bride

*Saree* – a garment worn by women in countries such as India and Pakistan

*Yama* – In Hinduism, Yama is known as the Lord of Death.

*Brahma* – refers to the Hindu Supreme God. Hindus believe in the trinity–Brahma, Vishnu and Shiva

*Moksha* or *Nirvana* – refers to liberation of the soul from suffering.

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