

**NARRATING MOBILITY, HYPHENATION, AND HYBRIDITY:  
A STUDY THROUGH SELECT AMERICAN NOVELS**

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## ABSTRACT

This thesis deals with the problems of mobility and hyphenated identity in the work of select contemporary Asian American fiction writers. It looks at migration—as addressed in these novels—as an act of geographical, cultural and psychological negotiation through and beyond the rhetoric of nostalgia and loss as well as celebration and empowerment.

This thesis shows how migration fiction addresses and interrogates the very nature of its hyphenated existence. It operates between opposing counters of acceptance and resistance on one hand, and an in-between space working towards a more hybrid identity, on the other. The thesis shows the construction of mutant identities in narratives of migration representing Chinese-American, Korean-American, Indian-American and Pakistani-American communities.

Chapter 1 frames theories of migration and examines how the politics of migration affects the host and settler communities. It shows the fluidity of each position available to the immigrant against a wider movement in search of a new and inclusive identity. Chapter 2 examines the ways in which immigrants negotiate displacement and how their absorption in the job sector is facilitated by professional networks. It also shows how the economic system in America absorbs them to the extent of allowing them provisional identities and making them a part of its consumer culture. Chapter 3 examines the work situation and the racial or gendered profiling therein—how migrants are pushed to taking up certain jobs and denied certain others—irrespective of existing credentials. This chapter argues that the workplace showcases the complications as well as the opportunities available to the immigrant in America. Chapter 4 examines the contradictory impulses in immigrant settlers of attachment to a place—a sense of rootedness—as well as a search for a better place/places. The immigrant is made by places, and also creates places. The chapter links Massey's idea of space as multiplicity and interconnectivity with Foucault's figure of a heterotopia, with its superimposed meanings. Chapter 5 examines the problematics of identity formation in migrant/diasporic communities. This chapter looks at the changing role of community in contemporary migration fiction and shows how it influences the identity formation of the

immigrant subject. It studies the ever-changing relationship between the individual and the community in defining and understanding the nature of the 'hyphen' for succeeding generations of Asian Americans. It shows that instead of complete assimilation, or disavowal as seen in some of the militant migrant groups, there are shades and levels of acculturation and dissociation amongst the immigrant settlers. This results in complex identities with conflicting demands on these people as they shift between two cultures.

Despite looking forward to life in America, the immigrant characters, as seen in the novels, cannot shed or outgrow the cultural ties to their place of origin. Consciously or unconsciously, they remain hyphenated Americans. In the case of the younger generations, their natural inclination towards a pan-American identity notwithstanding, there is a renewed interest in their parents' cultural ties to their erstwhile homelands in Asia. These characters are caught between two cultures with a troubled sense of identity. In the case of earlier immigrants, the claims of their original cultural identities were strong enough to have a retroactive effect on their attempts at assimilation with American society. With the later generations, especially the children of these settlers, there is a greater inclination towards a general American identity, irrespective of racial or cultural markers. This generation has to negotiate between the pulls of the identity they prefer and the ethnic cultural and religious values instilled on them by their parents at home, leading to tacit submission or clear-cut disavowal as the case may be. However, with greater political awareness and sensitization, most Asian Americans are seen to adopt a more hyphenated identity as they try to signal their ethnic difference within American society.