CHAPTER FOUR

Towards A NEW TOPOPOEIA:
REJECTING/RE-ESTABLISHING SENSE OF PLACE

> I would argue, for example, that representations of space are shot through with a knowledge (*savoir)* — i.e. a mixture of understanding (*connaissance)* and ideology — which is always relative and in the process of change.
>
> (Lefebvre, *The Production of Space* 41)

> Our epoch is one in which space takes for us the form of relations among sites....The space in which we live, which draws us out of ourselves... is also, in itself, a heterogeneous space. We...live inside a set of relations that delineates sites which are irreducible to one another and absolutely not superimposable on one another.
>
> (Foucault, "Of Other Spaces" 2-3)

> Precisely because space ... is a product of ... relations which are embedded material practices which have to be carried out, it is always in the process of being made. It is never finished; never closed. Perhaps we could imagine space as a simultaneity of stories-so-far.
>
> (Doreen Massey, *For Space* 10)

'Topopoeia' means 'poetics of place'. It points to the many ways in which occupants—both humans and animals—understand the different qualities of the places they inhabit. In the case of human beings—as perhaps in the case of animals—it is clear that the relationship is both physical and affective. Human beings not only inhabit spaces but also make or mark spaces that create specific sets of meaning in given contexts. Inhabiting a place—say, a village or a town or street-corner shopping arcade—is not simply a matter of spending time in a location but also drawing from and giving a sense of something specific to the location. In the case of immigrants or displaced persons and communities, each place they get to—or arrive at—is already prefigured by a sense of affective community, a preconceived bonding that may not play out that way.

Yet, this idea of making sense of a place is a major corridor of hope for the immigrant. It is not clear who or what triggers the sense of place but the setting of a place marked as friendly or attractive—or safe or resourceful or exhausted—is a combination of

topography and immigrant psyche. The sense of place, however, does not remain inflexible. Places mutate as people and communities mutate over time. Places and spaces are changed by their inhabitants as they change the inhabitants. Cities in the United States traditionally seen as friendly towards immigrants may, on closer analysis, appear to be less so when analyzed from a sociologist's point of view. When one examines the wages paid to illegal or immigrant labour, for example, the understanding of a city's friendly or unfriendly character assumes a different texture. Again, it is necessary to mark where and in what conditions these friendly cities accommodate the foreigners arriving in search of new lives. Migration fiction represents the new sense of place that shapes and triggers the identity of immigrants.

Place—sense of place—is primary to this identity formation. Affective communities, as Leela Gandhi observes, challenge the colonial binaries "by refusing the myths of cultural purity, origin, inauguration and initiation both to the imperial West and to its opposite" (*Affective Communities* 5). In the context of immigrants settling in America, some places and people without resorting to the exclusionary or divisive politics of 'us' and 'them,' extend their hands in a friendship which avoids the oppositional or the subversive. These may be taken to form affective communities in the line of Gandhi's argument.

It may be noted that place is as much about physical geographical co-ordinates as it is about the people inhabiting it. As observed by Pascual-de-Sans in the essay "Sense of Place and Migration Histories: Idiotopy and Idiotope," space gains character from people and vice versa:

> People's relationships to space allow them to be there, to pass through it, to enter it and to leave it. Bonds of different intensities are established. We usually mark our territory, as it marks us, and thus a space becomes a place. Through this acting upon and being acted upon, the lives of people and the lives of social groups become generally intimately related to the places where they or their relatives live, and where their ancestors lived. (349)

People draw upon a place and contribute to it at the same time. They either try to fit in with the place or try to change it as far as possible to meet their requirements. Then again, spaces may vary leading to different places.

Doreen Massey contends that space has to be recognized:

> as the product of interrelations, as constituted through interactions....Second that we understand space as the sphere of the possibility of the existence of multiplicity in the sense of contemporaneous plurality; as the sphere...of coexisting heterogeneity. Without space no multiplicity; without multiplicity no space. If space is indeed the product of interrelations, then it must be predicated upon the existence of plurality. Multiplicity and space are co-constitutive. (*For Space* 10)

Space exists in terms of multiplicity and interconnectivity as there is every likelihood of interpenetration at various levels. This combination of influences or determining factors takes it closer to Foucault's figure of the garden as a heterotopia:

> in the Orient the garden, an astonishing creation that is now a thousand years old, had very deep and seemingly superimposed meanings. The traditional garden of the Persians was a sacred space that was supposed to bring together inside its rectangle four parts representing the four parts of the world...and all the vegetation of the garden was supposed to come together in this space, in this sort of microcosm. As for carpets, they were originally reproductions of gardens (the garden is a rug onto which the whole world comes to enact its symbolic perfection, and the rug is a sort of garden that can move across space). The garden is the smallest parcel of the world and then it is the totality of the world. ("Of Other Spaces: Utopias and Heterotopias" 6)

What is manifest in Oriental gardens, becomes a possibility in contemporary diasporic sites or migrant settlements, and even more so in migration fiction as each acts as a site of contested as well as "seemingly superimposed meanings" (6). There is both embedding as well as intertwining of different strands or influences. As more and more threads or ideas are interwoven into the space it acquires texture which lends depth of meaning and significance obtained at multiple levels from the arboreal to the rhizomatic.

Again space may assume different dimensions as pointed out by Lefebvre in *The Production of Space*. He talks about the production of Space through "a dialectical relationship which exists within the triad of the perceived, the conceived, and the lived." He adds that this conceptual triad "loses all force if it is treated as an abstract model" (40). According to him, this triad includes:

1. *Spatial practice,* which embraces production and reproduction, and the particular locations and spatial sets characteristic of each social formation. Spatial practice ensures continuity and some degree of cohesion. In terms of social space, and of each member of a given society's relationship to that space, this cohesion implies a guaranteed level of *competence* and a specific level of *performance.*
2. *Representations of space,* which are tied to the relations of production and to the 'order' which those relations impose, and hence to knowledge, to signs, to codes, and to 'frontal' relations.
3. *Representational spaces,* embodying complex symbolisms, sometimes coded, sometimes not, linked to the clandestine or underground side of social life, as also to art (which may come eventually to be defined less as a code of space than as a code of representational spaces). (*The Production of Space* 33)

Lefebvre explains that "A spatial practice must have a certain cohesiveness, but this does not imply that it is coherent (in the sense of intellectually worked out or logically conceived)." Regarding *Representations of space*, he says that it "is the dominant space in any society (or mode of production)". That it pertains to "conceptualized space, the space of scientists, planners, urbanists, technocratic subdividers and social engineers, as of a certain type of artist with a scientific bent – all of whom identify what is lived and what is perceived with what is conceived" (43). About *Representational spaces*, he has this to say:

> This is the dominated—and hence passively experienced—space which the imagination seeks to change and appropriate. It overlays physical space, making symbolic use of its objects. Thus representational spaces may be said, though again with certain exceptions, to tend towards more or less coherent systems of non-verbal symbols and signs. (44)

Lefebvre observes further that:

> The perceived-conceived-lived triad (in spatial terms: spatial practice, representations of space, representational spaces) loses all force if it is treated as an abstract 'model'. If it cannot grasp the concrete (as distinct from the 'immediate'), then its import is severely limited, amounting to no more than that of one ideological mediation among others. That the lived, conceived and perceived realms should be interconnected, so that the 'subject', the individual member of a given social group, may move from one to another without confusion—so much is a logical necessity. Whether they constitute a coherent

> whole is another matter. They probably do so only in favourable circumstances, when a common language, a consensus and a code can be established. (40)

The conceived space embodies representations of space. The lived space is the representational space which is lived through its associated images and symbols. In this context Massey holds that “the spatial is as an ever-shifting social geometry of power and signification” (3). She says that this manner of looking at the spatial “implies the existence in the lived world of a simultaneous multiplicity of spaces: cross-cutting, intersecting, aligning with one another, or existing in relations of paradox or antagonism” (3).

No space can be free of ideological intervention or mediation or some kind of signification. Moreover, intersection of spaces through migration and lack of boundaries ensures that:

> it includes relations which stretch beyond—the global as part of what constitutes the local, the outside as part of the inside. Such a view of place challenges any possibility of claims to internal histories or to timeless identities. The identities of place are always unfixed, contested and multiple.” (*For Space* 5).

The seamlessness of space results in a socio-political fabric which discourages any attempt at upholding an inherited order which is homogenous at the same time. As space ceases to withstand outside influences, identities connected to it become fluid, unstable or multiform.

Returning to the significance of place in migration, it is seen that settlement and the relationships individuals and groups establish with places is equally important. The migratory process is linked to permanent residence in some place for some time at least as Pascual-de-Sans observes:

> It would offer an overall understanding of the bonds established by people – individually and collectively – with the places where they live and lived, through which they pass, about which they think, and where their ancestors are buried, leading to a socio-territorial inscription of their lives as a whole, in which the territory is not just the material foundation but rather an element in the way one positions oneself in the world. (350)

This is especially noticeable in the case of immigrants who come to a new land and establish a bond with a place or places. What other people take for granted—a suitable

place to call home—is not readily available to migrants from elsewhere as they have to try and fit into a locality and become part of a community. Sometimes people succeed in settling down in one place; at others they look beyond the place to another town or city and if they succeed, they try where possible to establish a homogenized corridor between them as they do not completely delink themselves from the earlier place of settlement. In this context what Pascual-de-Sans has to say is significant:

> In the course of a lifetime one is involved with not just one but with many different places. These different places do not all appear at the same time, nor do they carry the same weight and the same significance.... However, there are also places that appear sequentially, often with variable periods of overlap. Certain places are left behind, as new ones appear. Nevertheless, those that are left behind leave their marks and their reminders, to a greater or lesser degree.... The impact of new places often seems to erase the presence of former places; however, the latter do remain, as layers hidden under the newer contributions. The old layers are still there, and are the foundations upon which the newer ones are built. There are places that leave deeper marks than others and some places are more deeply marked than others by people staying there or passing through. (350)

Given this observation, it is possible to examine the search for place amongst migrants and diasporic communities as they establish points of contact between themselves and a place or places with a homogenized corridor linking these locations. Pascual-de-Sans looks at the significance of the different places that one comes across in life:

> Other places may appear during the course of people's lives, or not. Some will be chosen, others will be imposed; some are searched out, others are discovered by chance or through circumstantial moves. People may remain in places, voluntarily or by force, or may leave them behind, feeling more or less attachment. They may return to them, or may not. Among all the different places, there will be normally one – often only one – that acts as a central reference point and is recognized as such, as a place with which one has a privileged bond, a place of geographical identification or idiotope. (352)

A person may be connected to more than one place in a deeply significant way. They may stay in one place and then think of moving to another place without losing touch with the earlier place. In the case of immigrant/settlers, it is seen that they look for places which are conducive to their occupation and if they can connect with similar places with

their kind of people within a certain range. That in effect is the homogenized corridor that they try to establish for themselves, a kind of comfort zone within which they can operate with equanimity.

Creswell and Merriman argue that places play a more active role in the shaping of the world (*Geographies of Mobilities* 7). Instead of being considered a mere background, they argue for place as an ongoing process. Connecting how the passive idea of place might be linked to an important evolving issue of citizenship, they comment that a citizen is as much described by their affiliation to a state as by their right to move freely between places (9).

John Thieme tries to counter the idea of the fixed idea of space by studying pivotal topois in postcolonial texts in reference to the construction of place and space. Claiming that "postcolonial writing characteristically sees space as heterogeneous and malleable", he maintains that even identity politics in postcolonial writings, either implicitly or explicitly, tend to challenge the discourse that sees place as a stable entity (*Postcolonial Literary Geographies* 2). Thieme argues that "postcolonial geographies are fashioned *out of place* in two senses: they emanate from ever-evolving topographies and they stem from situations where people have been displaced, either by physical movement or by the disruption of their home environment by colonial intervention" (3).

Czaika and de Haas contend in "The Globalization of Migration: Has the World Become More Migratory?" that "migrants tend to concentrate in a shrinking number of prime destination countries. Also, while the number of empty migration corridors has decreased, migration has tended to concentrate in the larger corridors. This seems to contradict some key hypotheses of the globalization of migration paradigm" (285). But settlement within the United States does not seem to follow this pattern anymore. With the cities being filled to its capacity, new immigrants are making their way into semi urban and rural areas erstwhile untouched by the effects of migration as evidenced by both existent researches in sociology as well as in literature.

Place, more suitably, the play between place and placelessness becomes an interesting theme in migration literature. The very fact of migration assumes the existence of an elsewhere – a place one can move to. Place is the one aspect that can provide a sense of belonging, and conversely place on its own can make one feel displaced. At times, people are displaced from their place of origin; at other times, an individual may become

displaced without moving places by the onslaught of changes. The novels included in this chapter are Bharati Mukherjee's *Desirable Daughters*, set in the backdrop of San Francisco, Gish Jen's *World and Town*, set in a New England state, exact location undetermined, and Suki Kim's *The Interpreter*, set in the backdrop of New York.

Contemporary immigrants like their predecessors live a highly mobile life, although the motivation to move has changed over time. Places are spatially fixed, but are susceptible to temporal changes. Moreover, perceptions change as people try to give something back to the place as Hattie in *World and Town*.

> The places we have to negotiate are the result of the practices of those who were here before us but this place in the future will be different. It is not a once and for all achieved state. (Creswell, *Place* 36)

In this section, three physical places – New England, California and New York – will be studied to their extent of influencing the lives and choices of immigrants.

New England:

In Gish Jen's *World and Town*, the idea of place becomes a shifting metaphor for all the new changes that suddenly befall the town. The New England town, a fixed space in time, witnesses the arrival of the new in the form of the Chhungs, a Cambodian immigrant family who arrives with their own "place", a trailer. If home is a place, then the trailer, which is their home, is a movable place. Once the trailer is settled into position though, it starts to root itself into the surrounding space. The simple act of putting the milk crates to act as steps to the trailer door is the start of the process of rerooting. This portable place becomes farther rooted into the physical place by the growing garden behind the trailer that is started as soon as the family settles down. Yet what the Chhungs are unaware of is the soil condition or rather the lack of light in the area that makes garden an almost impossible task. Their lack of human contact prevents people from informing them about this deficiency of the soil (44). Chhung's attempt at gardening and "owning" the land becomes a wasted, temporary effort parallel to the using of the milk crates as steps – till the surroundings accept them, a place will remain unknown and unknowable. Thanks to the charity of the church, the Chhungs were quite bound to a soggy, damp, dark ground:

> There was some clearing, but mostly the place was woods, and not the picturesque kind. These were real woods, impassable woods, with trees leaning and lying all over. A lot of sodden logs and lichen and toadstools, and even on the live trees, dead branches that stuck out all around the trunks like thorns. There was no view, and no light. And being sunk in a pocket like that, most of the clearing, aside from the trailer site proper, was wet. (15)

Here, the small town of Riverlake proves to be a very tenacious place, retaining its characters despite the savageries of time. The place remains unchanged but it is as much because of the people. The white people of Riverlake embrace the Chinese-American, Hattie, in their midst but nevertheless it retains its "whiteness". Hattie with her confused Confucian principles forever remains a stranger in their midst, more American than Chinese in their treatment of her. The people of the town fight tooth and nail to any threat of change to the landscape that makes up their town. Ginny's deceased father Rex never got used to the hippies who shared borders with him, despite their being there for years. People like Ginny, born in the town, consider it their root, the only natural thing for them to do being to move back to the town. The people are desperate to retain the town in its unchanged state; hence their unanimous fight to keep the big city corporations out of their town, to prefer to stay out of the loop of the world rather than having a mobile network tower scarring the pristine landscape. Even the temporary balloon that marked the place for the cell phone tower is an eyesore to Hattie, herself an outsider, a self acclaimed stranger, yet one who has grown to love the landscape of the town so that she herself can't bear any change in it.

> But never mind; this is an age of flux. She, Hattie Kong, came from China; her neighbors from Cambodia; is there anyone not coming from somewhere? And not necessarily to a city with a cozy unhygienic ghetto, but sometimes—if not immediately, then eventually—to a fresh-aired town like Riverlake. A town that would have pink cheeks, if a town had cheeks. Riverlake being a good town, an independent town—a town that dates to before the Revolution. A town that was American before America was American, people claim—though, well, it's facing change now, and not just from the Cambodian family. Of course, there's always been change. In fact, if you want to talk about change, the old-timers will tell you how Riverlake wasn't Riverlake to begin with—how Brick Lake overflowed its banks a hundred years ago and came pouring down in a flood to here, and how the resulting body of water had to be renamed to avoid confusion. Riverlake, they

> dubbed it then—a lake born of a river. And the town that went with the lake was called that, too. Riverlake—a town born of change. (13-14)

Hattie is aware of how change has been at the very core of the existence of Riverlake. In fact the very old residents of Riverlake themselves admit the way the town was born as a result of the change in the geographical landscape brought about by a flood that led to the formation of a lake with the residual water. Yet their understanding of the process of change that led to the formation of the town does not extend to their acceptance of change in this beloved town. The place once formed has a fixed description and connotation in their minds that refuse to be altered. A place is a location in time and space, but the residents of Riverlake would like to ignore time itself so that the town adheres to their image of it.

Through Hattie's comments we see that the real life migration patterns are being reflected in the world of literature as well. Studies in recent migration patterns in the United States have shown that more and more immigrants are making inroads to the hinterland looking for a living. Places that did not traditionally fall along the great migration corridors were now witnessing the influx of immigrants. For newly arrived immigrants, often it is difficult to find livelihood in the bigger cities. Even unskilled, low paying jobs have been claimed by different ethnicities. The stiff competition often gives way to violence which results in the negative stereotyping of certain immigrant people. To avoid such scenarios, people are increasingly trying to move away from the cities. Out of the way white towns like Riverlake offers zero competition and hence are seen as ideal by immigrants. However they fail to take into consideration that such places are more prone to be suspicious of newcomers because of such towns being closed localities unexposed to the outer world.

The townsfolk in Riverlake are adamant that their town should remain unchanged. It is a town where everyone knows everyone as well as their ancestors. It is a microcosm where no happiness is secret, no grief is private. In a world rend asunder by horrific events like 9/11, Riverlake maintains its distance, and in its distance lies its security, its safety. It is a town almost in the lines of Shangri La, hoping to escape the ills of the modern world not by mercy but by neglect. They are aware of the all encroaching change coming at the heels of globalization and their way of countering it is to not let globalization seep into the town through the innocuous means of retail chains or cell phone towers.

As the Chhungs try to settle into their life in the trailer at the end of the town, the town expands to embrace them. It is not only the town that absorbs the Chhungs through the medium of church, school, etc., the Chhungs too absorb the town little by little despite its status as the outlier. The singlemost important impact of the town on the Chhungs is through Ginny's influence on Sophy. Sophy becomes an earnest follower of Ginny's church, going against her family's firm Buddhist background. Ginny influences Sophy negatively, bringing forth a sequence of events that will have far reaching consequences, destroying lives as well as the landscape of the town. And it is the town again that turns up to save Chhung from the literal pit that he had dug out himself in his attempt to make a drainage ditch (425).

For all the resistance that the town has to newness, it is interesting to see the way the people quietly accept the sudden appearance of a trailer in their midst, a trailer full of strange alien faces. Hattie seems to be the only permanent resident in the area who happens to be of mixed race; although there seems to be a number of Mexican immigrants in the town, both legal and illegal, working in the dairy farms. But they are not integrated into the frame of the narrative and by extension, into the town. They remain outsiders, which is not the case with the Chhungs; the Chhungs are integrated into the town despite their very transient home in the trailer, despite their severe personal troubles. This maybe because the town understands that the Chhungs are not there to take away jobs from the local and hence do not consider them a threat.

California

California on the west coast has always been a place for immigrants. Edward Soja gives a brilliant account of the brutality and destruction that has gone into making Los Angeles into the city that it is today. This is true of the entire state of California as well as the whole of United States. The contemporary California is famous as a technological hub because of the presence of the Silicon Valley. As such there is a huge influx of highly paid, skilled workers into the region. However, this necessitates the presence of a much higher number of unskilled workers of the menial category. Gabaccia and Leach in their work give an exhaustive account of the different categories of workers who run the Californian economy.

Desirable Daughters records the diversity that makes up the Californian landscape – diversity in terms of ethnicity, work and lifestyle. When Tara, the protagonist moves out

of a gated community because life inside the gate did not correspond with her ideas of life in the United States, she finally becomes a unit that makes up the diversity. Tara's life with her husband, Bish, inside the gated community of Silicon Valley was a continuation of her life in India. Her image of the United States as the land of infinite possibilities could not be realized inside it. A place does not simply exist as an objective out there; it is also shaped by people's expectations of it. For a long time, Tara continued to live her isolated solitary life, away from the companionship and excitement of the earlier days when she was the new immigrant wife of a university student on campus. She tolerated the suffocation of her life as a Hindu married woman till she could. But when she saw her son facing a similar predicament of living up to someone's expectations, she rebelled and moved out with her son. When Tara leaves her husband's place, she doesn't just leave behind the safety and security of a marriage but also the norms by which she had so far lived her life. She gets a job, gets an apartment, gets a boyfriend – actions made possible by her new anonymity. She is finally free to do what her life in Atherton had denied her – live by her own rules. After renovating the apartment that she rents, Tara for the first time in her life feels content with her surroundings. She finally feels at home. Not in her loving home in India, nor in the rich mansion of the wonderful Bish Chatterjee did she feel at home. That feeling of being at one with her environment occurs in faraway America, among a motley group of people with whom she shares nothing in common. The anonymity frees her and encourages her to be who she had always wanted to be:

> After all the work, I felt for the first time in my life totally at home, unwilling to leave. I am one with the neighborhood, a young woman like so many others on the street: ethnically ambiguous, hanging out in the coffee shop, walking dogs, strolling with boyfriends, none of us with apparent sources of income. It's a work-at-home neighborhood where the older arts and newer technology seem to have come together. We're on a first-name basis with all the grocers, the restaurant owners, the clerks at the hardware store, the art farmers, the wine merchants, the pharmacists, the hairstylists, the boys at the video rental. Their names inspire me: Ib, Selim, Moh, Safid, Ali… all the neighborhood services, except the laundries and the Japanese restaurant, are owned and staffed by crack-of-dawn rising, late-night closing Palestinians, whose shifting roster of uncles and cousins seems uniformly gifted in providing our needs and anticipating our desires. (25)

The “ethnically ambiguous” character of the place is celebrated as the highest achievement of California in the novel. Tara’s neighbourhood does not only boast of diversity in ethnicity, it also brings together “older arts and newer technologies” as a way of life although any mention of domestic workers is conspicuously absent.

Tara lives with her Hungarian-Buddhist contractor/yoga instructor boy friend, Andy, whom she met when she needed to have her house checked for earthquake safety. Through Andy, Tara is privy to the luxury weekends of the ultra rich, elite Hungarian community. Through her volunteering at a school to handle the “‘multicultural’ acquisitions” (78), she is privy to a more honest ethnic division:

> The little kids are ninety percent Asian, Latino, and African-American, the teachers, at least during the two years that I have volunteered here, all European-Americans. The rhetoric of modern San Francisco makes me invisible. I am not “Asian”, which is reserved for what in outdated textbooks used to be called “Oriental.” I am all things. When the little kids climb on my lap to be read to, or just listened to, I don’t think they see me as anything different from their parents, the school nurse, or their teachers… I thrive on this invisibility. It frees me to make myself over, by the hour. (78)

It is the invisibility that is so exhilarating to Tara – an invisibility that comes from anonymity. This ‘invisibility’ is based on the other’s deliberate blindness or unconcern but nevertheless it allows Tara to relish her freedom. The freedom to be whoever she chooses to be did not come cheap to her. She had to have her divorce from Bish as well as from her traditional Indian upbringing in order to experience the place for what it is; conversely, it was the place that made it possible for her to go ahead with such a transgressive decision.

Tara clearly breaks out of the gendered space of home within the gated community of Atherton when she moves out with her son into the less privileged, reckless life of the average immigrant (albeit with much more money and security!). When initially Tara moves to a new apartment post divorce, she is inundated with visits from Bish’s friends who were sexually attracted to her. To escape this new trouble, Tara leaves the peninsula and moves to the city. Here, she finally succeeds in making a new life. So in her case, the later Tara is definitely a spatially constructed gender identity.

The presence of the very poor and the very rich is always a recipe for disaster. As such, California as presented in the text is a hotbed of crime:

> The street people pose, often profanely, and scrounge for money. … To me, they are a small army of America's untouchables, a mockery of everything immigrant stands for. For every Bish Chatterjee and Chet Yee there's a cluster of green-haired waifs with pit bulls outside the new kiddy Gap and Starbuck's, begging for cigarettes and drug money. I feel guilt and sorrow when I walk past them, but a few blocks later, rage takes over. Their marginality is rooted in a deep and profound ownership that I will never know. The families in Atherton who worked their way to the big houses behind iron gates and posted guards could lose it all in a minute. (79)

When Tara fears crime, she does not fear it per se, but it is a fear based on losing out on the American dream because of other immigrants who could not fulfill their own. It is a fear of the poor other Indians whose decadence might reflect on the successful ones. Tara's fear is the fear of someone living inside and watching the things that goes on outside in the name of survival. And her biggest fear is of finding herself in the outside.

Yet despite her fear and the constraints she faces there (she cannot teach lacking a certificate), it is California that Tara considers home. When visiting her eldest sister in New Jersey, she realizes:

> In a city of foreigners, I was feeling the most alien…. If nothing else came of this trip, at least I would know I belonged in California. (194)

However the idea of relating one's identity to a place has its problem. Tara's life as she lives it in her new home in the family-owned neighbourhood is dismantled yet again when her home becomes a site of terror attack by people targeting her husband. In that sense, the place (California) and the people (Tara, Bish, Rabi) are continuously at flux – affecting and affected by each other.

New York

No other place in the United States has caught the imagination of the world as a celebration of multicultural diversity as New York. Sharing the original point of official entry Ellis Island with New Jersey, it is no wonder that New York should come to epitomize the immigrant spirit. *The Interpreter* is based in the city of New York and its

surrounding areas. *Desirable Daughters* is centred in California but has generous descriptions of New York City, particularly Jackson Heights.

The Interpreter explores multiple aspects of the place – from a place marked by violence to a place celebrating diversity, from a place where the marginalized feels at home to a place where immigrants are always considered second class citizens. This it achieves by positing the image of an immigrant New York limited primarily to specific regions of New York City alongside a more cosmopolitan Manhattan of students, artists and gay men. For instance, when Suzy is trying to find her family's accountant, she initially thinks of looking for him on the Yellow Pages but then remembers:

> Most Korean accountants would not be advertised in it. What would be the point? No American clients come to them anyway. She would do better with the Korean Business Directory or Korean newspapers, neither of which she has in her apartment. His office had been located in Koreatown, above a restaurant that specialized in bone-marrow soup, 32nd Street in midtown Manhattan. A part of the city she rarely visits. The pervading smell of *kimchi* along the street. The posters on windows displaying jubilant Korean movie stars. Bright neon signs in Korean letters. (191)

The passage does not merely conjure up Koreatown with its smell and spirit but it also evokes a deep sense of alienation from the American context. No Americans go there for business, even she herself had rarely been there. To Suzy, it seemed the very place is gradually eroding away from human grasp.

Yet when she goes to visit the place, this is what she encounters:

> From her seat at the window, she can see the bustle on 32nd Street. The same bone-marrow-soup restaurant, just downstairs from the accountant's office. Several tables are occupied already although it is barely noon....Some of them sneak glances at Suzy sitting alone, hiding behind the *Korea Daily*....She stares...at the row of restaurants across the street. The second-floor windows are plastered with neon signs for hair salons, acupuncturists, even a twenty-four-hour steam bath. The third and fourth floors continue up the same way, cluttered with shops that only Koreans frequent. It is a way of cramming the immigrant life into one tiny block. One could stroll back and forth along this quarter-mile stretch and find anything, from bridal gowns to Xerox toners. Nothing is missing. No craving is hard to fill. (195)

The place she encounters now has no semblance of isolation. It is a bustling place of business with every indication that the place is flourishing. The proud display of Korean letters, the presence of the many businesses that has come to be associated with the Korean Americans like salons, acupuncturists, etc., the presence of shops that caters exclusively to Koreans seem to imply that the community has grown to be more secure. The 1992 riots following the Rodney King incident had proved perilous for Korean American businesses. So the given description highlights how far the community has progressed since then. It is perhaps Suzy's own ambiguity to such ethnic locations that makes her imagine Korean enclaves as dull and lifeless.

Suzy is the child of parents who were informers for the Immigration and Naturalization Services (INS). Her elder sister, Grace, was the one who did all the translating for her parents, to the extent that it was she who carried the guilt of betraying her own people. This resulted in a deep schism among the family members with Suzy being the only person left in the dark as to what her parents really did for their upward mobility. The only impression Suzy had was of a life spent moving from one house to another at a moment's notice. She never got to socialize with other Korean Americans despite living within Korean enclaves most of her life. Grace took it to another extreme by hanging out with gang members in direct defiance of her father. Small wonder then that, for the Park sisters, life in Koreatown prompted an image of gloom and hopelessness.

Grace escapes to the church and college, and Suzy escapes to a relationship with a married white man, Damien – both daughters competing to cut off all ties with their family. It is after Suzy ends her affair with Damien that she moves to the other New York, the sophisticated, cosmopolitan world where difference is celebrated instead of being ridiculed:

> Apartment hunters in Manhattan are truly desperate. At 7 p.m. on Tuesdays, they line up outside Astor Place Stationery, where the first batch of *The Village Voice* is delivered upon printing. That is where the apartment war begins, everyone grabbing the first issue and running to the nearest phone booth to call the handful of landlords who fill the ad space with "No broker, low rent!" For three consecutive Tuesdays, Suzy stood in line with no luck. ... she actually found it comforting to see that she was not the only one looking for a new home or new life in the streets of New York. Mostly they were college graduates fresh

> from Middle America who had watched too much MTV and decided to try their luck the minute they could scrape up some money to get to the city. (22-23)

This New York has an upbeat air of promise around it. This New York that has limited housing space is swamped by new arrivals pursuing their new American Dreams. This is the multicultural New York that Suzy escapes to from the other New York which shall forever remain tainted with the murder of her parents.

Desirable Daughters gives an account of Jackson Heights, the very same Jackson Heights where Suzy Park claimed “the Korean population makes up nearly 50 percent” (203). But the Jackson Heights that Tara visits is a mini India instead:

> Jackson Heights is not a Chinatown or even a Japantown on the San Francisco model. Paint and neon have not transformed a settled old Mediterranean – Queens neighborhood of wood – frame houses into anything recognizably Indian. Indian people shop collectively, but they don’t live together in tight little communities. (198)

This claim that, Indians do not live together but shop together, is borne out by all three Indian American novels taken up in this thesis. This also implies that Indians make a sharp distinction between their place of residence and their place of business. Yet one is only too aware of the porousness of spaces.

There is also the not-so-subtle statement that there is something disreputable about “being” from Jackson Heights:

> “Jackson Heights,” the concept if not exactly the place, is a rung on the ladder of acceptability that privileged Indians such as myself, who arrived with the right degrees or the right marriage, have been able to bypass. Since there’s no “old money” in an immigrant community, most of us start on the same plane. We came with nothing but a degree, or with zeal, and money is the only way to measure success. Announce in an Indian gathering that you have a shop in Jackson Heights, and you are proudly declaring your horde of gold and dollars, but also the shame of degreelessness….Jackson Heights is a landscape of potentialities that had been denied in India. (200)

For Tara, who had through marriage, made it to the highest place of immigrant aspiration – the gated multicultural community of highly skilled, high earning entrepreneurs – Jackson Heights is emblematic of the “hungering classes” of India, trying their hands at everything to improve their condition. To her, the place can undoubtedly make a fortune

for someone but anyone associated with the place, no matter how rich, lacks class. It is after all peopled by the ones who were "denied in India". But that is after all the beauty of Jackson Heights – that it is a place where one is not held back by the simple lack of a degree. In that sense, it is a place similar to Silicon Valley – if one has merit and the necessary chutzpah, one is bound to be successful.

The contemporary immigrant today is increasingly moving towards placelessness by choice. This move leaving behind the very idea of home as located in a specific place has been necessitated by the harsh experiences that are often the fate of immigrants in a foreign land. As Relph observes, "loss of attachment to places and the decline of the ability to make places authentically do constitute real deprivations, and that the redevelopment of such attachments and abilities is essential if we are to create environments that do not have to be ignored or endured" (*Place and Placelessness* 145). The problem with the redevelopment of such attachments in the case of immigrants is doubly difficult because place is made up of people, and people seldom take well to newcomers.

These novels show that for immigrants, environments would always be more about enduring than enjoyment. The challenge is to find one where there is a balance between the two. In *World and Town*, the immigrant experience is expressed through the characters of Hattie and Sophy. Hattie has spent her entire adult life in the US. She is now back at Riverlake, the town where she first settled when she had moved to the US, a widow and a retired teacher. At first glance, it would seem that in Hattie's case at least, Relph's fear of the loss of attachment to a place was not realized. It has been two years since Hattie has been living at the town, imperceptibly merging into the social life of Riverlake, joining group walks, attending townhall meetings, etc. She has rekindled the adolescent love affair with Carter Hatch, the son of the family where she lived as a student. It is when they visit the town cemetery that Hattie is forced to confront her own relation to the place:

> Hattie stops with Carter at the new extension to the already huge Hatch family plot.... Carter blinks and clears his throat. "Speaking of which"—he clears his throat again—"is it at all conceivable that you'll want your name on a rock here, too, someday? That is, eventually? I don't mean to be morbid."... She looks around at the beautiful woods...she sees well enough....Everything will be white soon. How she wishes she could say yes. But *dá guān*—she feels she belongs

> elsewhere, somehow. Nowhere.... She was always a guest in this family: welcome, then—as she will always remember—welcome to leave. (452-53)

Hattie realizes that despite appreciating the beauty of the place, she has never felt any attachment to it. The place had never claimed her for its own. It had not wronged her but it had neither embraced her. She is free there – free to leave or to stay. In that sense, Riverlake to Hattie already stands for the "placelessness" that Relph talks about. While Relph talks of attachment to a place, Hattie's constant refrain is "*dá guān*" – detachment.

In the case of the Chhungs, the Cambodian family, there is an attachment to the idea of place, but again it is a place tempered with memory and therefore more mythical than real. The family has been torn apart by circumstances with two daughters living in two separate foster homes in another state, while the rest of the family has had to move to Riverlake. The older Chhungs, Ratanak and Mum, still dreams of moving back to Cambodia despite living in the United States for almost two decades. Sophy though misses her life in their old city; she specifically misses the bedroom that she had shared with her two sisters:

> ... the funny thing is that, back in their old town, Sophy's sisters and her were happy. Like they all slept together, the three of them in two beds pushed together, and even though there was a crack in the middle, they didn't care. They had an agreement that whoever slept on the crack could have the biggest poster to put up, and so it was always Sophan who slept there, because she just loved that *Titanic* movie! ... who so wanted Jack and Rose to get together in their next life that she was, like, burning incense for them all the time.... Pretty soon the whole top of the bureau was basically an altar to Jack and Rose, with oranges and incense and plastic flowers and swans and stuff, sort of like what their mom liked to put all over the TV, only with this giant *Titanic* poster above it... they loved the whole mixed-up scene, and would take pictures of themselves wearing their own clothes and each other's clothes ... (143-44)

It is obvious that more than the place, what Sophy misses is the easy bonhomie of being with her sisters. The place in itself holds no affectionate memory of her or for her. She is just another problem kid with a history of bad behaviour. Eventually, when an opportunity arose, the family left the city even leaving the two daughters behind – that is the extent to which the place repelled the entire family.

In Riverlake, the family has a difficult time adjusting to the mostly homogeneous town. With their limited English, domestic troubles as well as Sophy's involvement in lawbreaking incidents, it takes a long time for the family and the town to come to terms with each other. But they do finally accept each other. But no sooner does the Chhung family find itself in the good book of the town, they begin to consider moving elsewhere:

> ... the Chhungs've been talking about maybe moving. Mum needs a temple and misses the holidays "like really bad," Sophy says. And they all miss other black-hairs, and Cambodian food, and Chinese food, and the Asian supermarket; and Sophan has e-mailed to say she is not sure she could ever get used to the cold. (456)

The Chhungs are trapped in their desire for an elsewhere – a place where they can feel a sense of belonging to a community of people like them. But as they know too well from their experience in the big city, such belonging comes at its own cost. Riverlake, despite its olive branch, is unable to fulfil the family's basic need for familiar food and companionship. The very climate of the place seems hostile to the family.

Moreover, there are other external conditions that come to factor in the family's decision. More than the attachment to a place, when one is an immigrant, one needs to look at the practicality of things:

> Sopheap, though, knows at least one other Cambodian family willing to go anywhere. And if that's true, and if they really do move to Riverlake, well, even that would change things. Though what if after that family comes another family, and after that, another? Then, the Chhungs know, there could be trouble. ... Especially as there are more Mexican workers up here all the time, she says, some of them legal and some of them not; the dairy farms can't run without them. (456)

They know of families, other Cambodian families, who might be willing to move to Riverlake. They are aware that their craving for people of their kind can be met in Riverlake itself. They are unfortunately only too aware of how a scenario like that would end. Years of living in the US has attuned them to the threat that a growing immigrant community poses to the people around. Caught in the dilemma of living at a peaceful place like Riverlake without any connection to others of their ethnicity or living at places among their community with its own sets of troubles, it is small wonder then that the

Chhungs will forever be moving elsewhere – imbibing the values of placelessness a little more with every move.

In *Desirable Daughters*, placelessness is presented as a feature of the successful immigrant as well as a desirable end – the only end that can bring about comparative contentment. The places that Tara identifies with are cosmopolitan places with rootless people. Tara's own neighbourhood in San Francisco has gone through contrary phases in its evolution to its present status of elitism:

> Twenty pregentrification years ago, the neighborhood had been as solidly rental as it now is family-owned, as cheap as it now is overpriced. Sixty years before that during the war, large rooms had been subdivided and rented out to shipyard workers and Navy personnel. (259)

This neighbourhood is not homogeneous in terms of ethnicity, but wealth. Although far from the gated communities of Atherton, this particular neighbourhood too is accessible only to the wealthy members of the society. The placelessness that Tara yearns for is one of privilege and freedom. She is one of the most honest pursuers of the idea of placelessness in that she has no attachment to any particular place. She relishes her detachment to all places at the same time as she suffers from the knowledge that people who belong to their places, have something far more important than freedom.

Tara believes she belongs to California, but it is not the physical place she belongs to. She prefers San Francisco to Atherton because of the freedom it provides to pursue her life as a liberated single woman. She prefers California to New York because of the traffic. She prefers the US to India because that is where she has developed into a real individual out of the shadow of parents and husband. So Tara's relation to San Francisco is based more on convenience than attachment. She knows she does not own the place and is happier that the place does not bind her.

In *The Interpreter*, both the Park sisters leave home, hoping to leave behind all the tainted associations of their parents' lives. Their bad life decisions resulting from their desire to alienate their parents have sad consequences in their own lives. Yet they carry on – both sisters living outside Koreatowns in the mostly cosmopolitan areas of NYC. Once they negate their Korean roots, the girls find themselves unmoored, constant outsiders in every situation:

> The apartment resembles a temporary shelter. There is no sweetness here, no flowery sheets, no matching duvet cover, no framed childhood photos. In fact, Suzy cannot say if she is attached to anything anymore. A jade ring that once belonged to her mother? An album filled with her childhood photos? A videotape of her seventh-birthday party? No such memorabilia in her apartment. (37)

Suzy never had a home. Her life since she can remember had seen a series of houses. Even her memories are not rooted, overlapping each other across time and place. Hence when she has a place of her own finally, she is unable to turn it into a home. There is nothing there from her past. In fact, her place is almost a non-place, without any trace of personality inherent in it.

In the five years since their parents' murder, Suzy had only been going through the motions of living. She finds herself again in a relationship with a married, white man. It is only the reopening of the murder case that leads Suzy to finally seek some answers to all the unanswered questions that shadow her own life. This in turn leads her to revisit some of the places where she had grown up.

In the process of revisiting these places, Suzy's complete disconnect from the places is revealed. She is unable to see the beauty and strength in community, instead only seeing the misery and the poverty of the place and the people. Suzy, who is often seen taking a sympathetic view of her Korean clients, is of course unable to appreciate the coming together of the entire community to get rid of her parents. Instead she is doomed to a life of loneliness, because of not knowing what she wants:

> Everyone's in it together, a communal experience, this day, this life. It is not her life, though. She does not know this. She does not want this. (3)

The trouble with Suzy is that she does not "know" any place. She is a stranger everywhere, much like Hattie, Sophy or Tara. She is driven by the undesirability of things, rather than pursuing the things she desires. No matter how and where she has moved, her immediate environment has always been a test of endurance for her.

> ... she did not feel that she came from one particular place. When someone asked where she was from, she would pause and run through her mind the various apartment complexes in Flushing, the Bronx, the inner parts of Queens, even Jersey City, where they had lived for a few years when Mom got a job at a nail salon during their first years in America. None of them fit the bill, she

> thought. Korea, she would ponder, but that also seemed far away, for they immigrated when she turned five, and Grace six. Suzy could hardly remember the place. (43)

Attachment to any place becomes impossible under such circumstances. Like Suzy, Grace too suffers from a chronic lack of attachment to places. In fact the Park sisters are defined by their repulsion to Korean enclaves, more than any loyalty or attachment towards a place. The fact that Grace chooses to scatter their parents' ashes over the Atlantic at Montauk, a place where her parents had never been, is suggestive of how little places mean to her – and for that matter, her parents' wishes. To Suzy and Grace, every place then is a non-place – which they cohabit and in which they coexist with different variables across time.

Apart from the individual's attachment to a place or places, people, immigrant settlers appear to find their comfort zones in certain public places either in the town or city of their residence or elsewhere as these novels show. The rapid mobility of the twenty first century has made the "bounded space" grow more expansive while the shifting relative locations became the sole space of affiliation. The immigrant's home in the new land does not have the finality of home. Nor does the surrounding space provide any sense of rootedness. Instead these feelings of belonging, or rather oneness, are found in different spaces.

Airports

The airport is a unique place. According to Edward Relph, the airport is an example of placelessness as well as something that encourages the spread of placelessness. Marc Auge calls airports a non-place – a place marked by mobility and travel, "where particular histories and traditions are not (allegedly) relevant". Non-places are the space of travellers as Suki Kim observes:

> Some guy once told me that the airport is where the American dream begins. It's all up to whoever picks you up there. If it's your cousin who owns a dry cleaner, you go there and learn that business. If it's your brother who fillets fish for a living, you follow him and do that too. (*The Interpreter* 149)

If the airport can be seen as the threshold of one's ambitions, it also remains the final counter of negotiation as relatives send or carry the dead person's bones to the original homeland. *World and Town* sees a constant battle of the written word between Hattie and

her distant relatives spread across the world, over the issue of relocation of her parents' bones. A series of unfortunate incidents seems to pursue the extended family living in different parts of the world – accidents, sickness, "inappropriate" love affairs, poor performance in studies, etc. The family believes that the reason behind these incidents is the fact that Hattie's parents' bones have not reached their final resting place – Qufu in China. It is their belief that till the bones are interred in the rightful place, till tradition is honoured, bad luck will not end.

Hattie, guided by a scientific mindset as well as years of living in the US, has zero tolerance for what she considers hogwash. But then she dreams of her parents and of Qufu, again and again, and she decides to give in – to "tradition and hope and humility and coping". And this leads her to the airport in Iowa:

> The plane lands with a jolt and a bounce; Hattie gathers up her things. There's a jetway now—things have modernized. And what a cheery new lounge, with such cheery new carpet; it could be a children's playroom. (*World* 391)

The cheeriness of the airport is in sharp contrast to Hattie's business at hand. After all, she is there to disinter her parents' bones. Yet the non-place that the airport is, catering to the needs of the highest number, it is also singularly unresponsive to the needs of its users. Its modernity and artificial cheeriness is not meant to provide cheer but to reflect a sense of impersonal competence. And Hattie realizes and hence her comparison of the place to a children's playroom – infantile and unreal.

A further dissonant element is introduced into this environment in the form of the bone picker, Lennie:

> Somehow Hattie had not imagined that the bone picker would be dressed all in black. But here he is—black sweater, black jeans, black boots, and he's holding a black leather jacket, too. He has respectfully removed the earbuds of his MP3 player; they dangle back behind his neck like the earpieces of an inexplicably limp stethoscope. Still, a mini-beat emanates from them, tinny and tuneless. (391)

In the cheerful airport, Lennie cuts quite a contrastive picture in his all black attire. At the same time, the figure of Lennie is self-contradictory in itself. He's a traditional bone picker dressed in black, holding on to the ancestral service, yet he is also an American young man in his string bracelets and earphones that are on even as they dangle behind his back.

The airport brings together disparate people together for a moment. Hattie and Lennie could have met nowhere else; despite both of them being Chinese American they are very different people – Hattie always critical of the Confucian values yet living it through her actions and Lennie making a living out of the same values as he negotiates being a typical American. It is strangely apt that ancient bones should bring two people together at the airport – the gateway, the destination as well as the starting point of one's aspirations.

Churches

Yet another place that brings people together is the church. The church is the perfect example of the unreal imposed on the real. Historically the church has brought the faithful together into one place. In the words of Tim Cresswell:

> We exist in and are surrounded by places – centers of meaning. Places are neither totally material nor completely mental; they are combinations of the material and mental and cannot be reduced to either. A church, for instance, is a place. It is neither just a particular material artifact (sic), nor just a set of religious ideas; it is always both. Places are duplicitous in that they cannot be reduced to the concrete or the "merely ideological"; rather they display an uneasy and fluid tension between them. (*In Place/Out of Place* 13)

For immigrants though, a church comes to mean much more than a place of worship. In *World and Town*, the church plays a crucial role in the narrative. It is the church which makes possible the Chhung family's relocation to Riverlake. Even the trailer in which the family resides is parked in land that belongs to the church:

> And it's a whole lot churchier up here; they live, in fact, at the edge of a mini–Bible Belt. No megachurches, thankfully— people up here don't go in for that. But the churches with big crosses on their sides are cropping up like a new kind of weed, even as the steepled churches on the green appear to be following their congregations to their Maker: The last construction project in Hattie's own church was a wheelchair ramp. (84)

The church tries its best to be inclusive, to bring more people in to its fold. New churches abound and continue to be built while the old ones try to be more accommodating to its old members. Sin here is a frequent discourse as well as thought, a consequence of being in the Bible belt.

That apart, the physical space of the Church comes to figure in a big way in the life of Sophy, the young daughter of the Chhungs. The Heritage Bible Church would send a car every week to the trailer. Being Buddhists, the Chhungs would use the car to go to the store but would never go by the church. Pitying the driver, Sophy started going to the Bible study centre. The Chhungs were first drawn to church because the church was their only way of escape from their old life. They first experienced friendliness from others within a church during their way to Riverlake:

> Every day Ruth would come take them to church, and every now and then some lady would say how glad she was that they were being saved from temptation, but that was all. People were just really friendly. Like they made sure they were saying your name right and asked a lot of questions about Cambodia, and even sort of liked it that Sophy's mom didn't speak English and paid her extra attention because of it. (167-68)

As poor immigrants, the Chhung family had become used to being treated as dirt. Experiences at foster care had taught the younger children, Sophy and Sarun, to be wary of the whole "path to Jesus thing". But here there was no coercion to praise the Lord. Instead people were extra nice to them, lavishing attention on them, privileging them for their shortcomings. It is these little things that first drew Sophy's attention to the church, a quiet hope that things might be different even for a little Cambodian girl inside the premise of a church.

And initially the Heritage Bible Church turned out to be everything Sophy had hoped for. Although she had gone there to make up for the rude refusal of her family, she quickly finds herself pulled in by the comfortable environment there. No one pushes anything on her. Instead she finds free food, people who would relieve her of her babysitting duties and most importantly, companions her age – one of them from Vietnam, which makes her feel a part of a group. She is drawn to the physical comfort of the centre as much as the baby, Gift, is. Gift is lured by the many toys in the play space and completely content to be there. Sophy is also drawn in by the seriousness with which the other girls pursue their Bible study. She stays the entire time that first day because she knew Lynn, the driver, expects her to stay. Despite her having a good time overall, she is not blind to the shortcomings of the place – the cookies are not as good as Hattie's and the singing alienated her with the unknown words. But she stays because no matter what, the room was infinitely nicer than the trailer she called home.

The place captures her. It takes only one visit to the church for her to completely come under its spell:

> But then one day she went to take a look, and as soon as she walked in, she did know something. Like as soon as she walked in she knew she just wanted to sit there and look up at the windows so bad, and maybe Gift knew she wanted that too, because he was quiet for a change. ... Probably if anyone had asked her before that whether she cared about rooms and whether they could change her being, she would have said no, especially since she had never even thought before about whether she had a being. But sitting there, she suddenly knew that she did, she had one, and that it was being changed… she loved the windows all around, … loved the airiness of the space too, and she loved it that it wasn't crammed full of gold statues. Like she loved it that there wasn't incense burning and making her cough, and that it wasn't full of Cambodian women afraid of *k'maoch* either. It was different here. (180-81)

This is how the church affects her by its very physicality. The airiness, the spaciousness, the expanse, all move her to a deeper understanding of herself. It is also interesting to note that the church appeals to her because of its conspicuous difference to the stifling traditional temples that she had so far frequented. She undergoes a very personal moment on her own prompted by the very physical space of the church.

Anne Soon Choi speaks of the role of the church in the lives of Koreans abroad:

> For Korean immigrants, one of the most important institutions for the maintenance of ethnic identity has been the Korean church. Like the earliest Korean immigrants, the majority of Korean immigrants today identify themselves as Christians and belong to Korean ethnic churches.... For many Korean immigrants, the church represents more than a place to worship. Korean churches have served as the "glue" for the immigrant community. (*Korean Americans* 85)

The church functions as the cultural centre among Korean Americans. The ethnic churches help in the dissemination of the cultural values and are important in shaping the newer generations. The church functions not merely as a place of worship, but it is also the cultural centre of the community.

In *The Interpreter* too, the church occupies a central role. For Korean Americans, the church is an integral part of one's life. It is also the place where networking takes place

and since the Korean American community is primarily made up of small business holders, the significance of the church in practical matters often weigh more than spiritual issues:

> All Korean churches advertise. The competition is fierce. Sometimes a newspaper is sponsored by a specific church, like an allegiance to a political party. The prime missionary spots are restaurants and airports. At entrances to Korean restaurants, there are often boxes of sermon tapes provided by different churches. At the JFK's KAL lounge, it is not unusual to find Korean missionaries approaching those freshly arriving, like the zealous hostel-owners at tourist islands when the ship comes in. (198)

The popularity of the church in the Korean imagination results in competition among the different churches to claim the largest congregation. The very description in the passage evokes an almost commercial nature to the transactions of the church.

In keeping with that tone, in this text, the church is often exploited by the different characters to fulfil their personal agendas. The church becomes instrumental in smuggling immigrants illegally when brokers use the yearly choir tour to arrange immigration to the US. Others use the church because of its "usefulness":

> Her parents had been floaters. They went to churches on a whim. Good for business, Suzy thought. They always had a specific reason for each visit. Either a job connection from one of the elders or trade gossip or market information. A church was where most Koreans gathered on Sundays, and it would have been foolish to ignore its usefulness. But they were atheists at heart. More than once, she overheard Dad cursing off Christians. "Bastards," he'd say. "They'd even give up their own mother if they thought it would guarantee a spot in that nonsense called heaven." ... the message was clear: Jesus was not for Koreans. (44-45)

None of the four members of the Park household have any regard or respect for the church as a place of worship. Mr. Park, the unscrupulous businessman and spy, uses the church for his own benefit. Although dismissive of Christianity as well as the church, his astute business acumen allows him to appreciate the various opportunities that comes with visiting the churches.

When he considers his daughters to be of marriageable age, it is to the church that he sends them:

> The only time Grace left the house was to attend Christmas Eve services. Dad didn't mind, surprisingly. He even suggested that Suzy go as well. He said that, now that they were both of age, college girls, a church was as good a place as any for finding decent Korean boys. He believed that most Koreans, like him, attended church for convenience, for getting work tips or finding someone to marry. (210)

Although Mr. Park does not believe in the church or its teachings, he does not find it ironic that the boys he would consider for his daughters – "decent Korean boys" – would be found there. It was the first and only time he used the church for a personal matter.

But Grace, the elder daughter, has her own agenda for being in the church:

> Through the entire service, Grace sat staring elsewhere. She did not seem to be listening to the sermon or the chorus of hymns. Suzy noticed that at one point, while the pastor was speaking, Grace ripped a page from the Bible and folded it over the gum she was chewing. It seemed almost purposeful, as if she wanted Suzy to witness her, as if she wanted to tell Suzy something. Suzy could not take her eyes off the Bible with the missing page, which Grace put back neatly on the shelf as the service came to an end. (210)

Grace studied religion and took to the Bible because she wanted to reject her father's way of life in every aspect. She goes to the church because she knows of her father's revulsion to Christianity. When she rips off a page from the communal Bible, her act goes beyond desecration. She is making it clear to her sister, Suzy, that she holds nothing sacrosanct; that her life is and shall remain unknowable to her little sister. The very sacredness of the church makes it possible for Grace to make her heretic point without speaking a word.

The only time one sees the church being actually used to gain peace of mind is when Suzy visits the St. John the Divine cathedral as an undergraduate:

> There was something oddly comforting about a cathedral whose façade was forever being repainted or repositioned. She liked sitting on a pew while listening to the usual banging of hammers and drills coming through the stained-glass windows. She hoped that the cathedral would never get done, that it would always remain half finished with steel wires sticking out. God had problems too, Suzy thought, and his cavernous sanctuary was a mess. (51)

Yet it is not the quiet peaceful nature that is the hallmark of churches that attract Suzy. What actually she finds reassuring instead is the fact that nothing is perfect – that even God's sanctuary is assaulted by the outside world of enterprise. It may be noted that most Korean American churches "rent their service time from American churches." Thus the same space of the church acquires a different ambience for a specific time of the day despite all other things remaining the same.

Subways

The curious thing about mobility is that although being mobile is a sign of freedom, the truth is that often the terms of mobility are quite restrictive. The subway is one such place that promises freedom and confinement at the same time. Mostly subway journeys are short journeys, but despite that for working people it costs them "the better part of the day, the better mood of their lives" (*Interpreter* 185). The subway is a travelling space and is in a way similar to churches that rent their time in that the space it occupies changes its character, but much more frequently:

> Once the train glided out of Manhattan, it emerged into the open, no more tunnels, no more underground darkness. The sudden sunlight was ruthless. The sallow faces of the passengers became too visible, and the faded graffiti on the walls appeared sad and past its glory. Outside revealed the uneven surface of Jackson Avenue, the first stop in Queens. The gray buildings crammed against the pale-blue sky, and the interweaving highways jutted forth in confused directions. (*Interpreter* 104)

The inside space of the subway changes with its movement reflecting the outer world in its mood.

In *The Interpreter* and *Desirable Daughters*, the subway reveals how even mobile places come to be associated with particular immigrants. What is interesting is that both the texts depict the same subway route – the number 7:

> The Number 7 line is for immigrants, the newly arrived immigrants, the ones they call FOB, fresh-off-the-boat, the ones who have to seek out their own kind for a job, a house, everything foreign in this new land. Hardly any whites on the Number 7 except for their seasonal outings to Shea Stadium, and blacks favor the 2, 3, 4, 5, the lines bound for the Bronx and Brooklyn. The Asians rule on the

> Number 7, mostly Chinese, many Koreans, some Indians, few Hispanics. Even the subway regulations on the steel door are written in Chinese. (*Interpreter* 103)

Desirable Daughters narrates:

> We made our way to the lowest level of the Forty-second Street station, to a waiting 7 train, where seats were still plentiful, though filling rapidly. (195)

So the two texts published around the same time corroborate the reality of the Number 7 line as a line for immigrants. It is because of the fact that the Number 7 line passes through areas that used to make up the homogenized corridors.

The subway is all powerful in *The Interpreter*. The novel starts with Suzy Park stranded at South Bronx with nowhere to go because the subway was unexpectedly ahead of schedule. This arbitrary control of the subway on Suzy occurs time and again:

> It was an impulse. She was on the Number 4 train, a downtown express from the Bronx, forty minutes maximum. The familiar drone announced Grand Central. Change here for the 5, 6, 7, and the shuttle to Times Square. Watch out for the closing door! It was the Number 7 that stuck out at her. ... Soon she was back on the platform, the Number 7 train platform this time. She could get out at different stops on the Number 7, which would lead to the various neighborhoods where she grew up. Queensboro Plaza, 46th Street, Jackson Heights, Junction Boulevard, and Woodside... (102-03)

The subway – that most transient of place, an unstable place, a commuter's place – has evocative power over Suzy. The subway is not home but the subway takes one home. Long after one has cut off all ties with a particular place, the pull that a familiar drone can exert on one's will can almost be ascribed to muscle memory.

The subway is also reflective of the changing times and not just spaces:

> There was a couple sitting opposite her. A pair of high-school sweethearts, a willowy Chinese girl with shiny braces and bell-bottom jeans leaning in the arms of a Hispanic boy with a pimply face and a diamond stud in his left ear. Times were different now. You rarely saw couples like that when Suzy was growing up. (103)

The subway being a non-place offers refuge to such people. It is on its own an escape as well a way to escape.

In *Desirable Daughters* though, the subway is a place that actually prevents interaction. Tara flies to New York from California to confront her elder sister, Padma, about an incident of the past. Padma is equally determined to prevent Tara from bringing up the topic. Seeing as how Padma manages to elude Tara at home, Tara hopes to get a chance to bring up the topic of Padma's secret pregnancy as a teenager:

> If you must bring up unpleasantness can't you find a better place than a New York subway? Just watch your tongue, this train is full of Bangladeshis and they pick up every word. (197)

But Padma cunningly uses the subway to slip out of the conversation. She uses the very confinement that Tara had hoped for as a reason not to pursue the conversation. In fact all mobility fails to create a better life in this text. The sites of mobility – the airports, the subways – all end in a failure to communicate. At the airport, after she goes and talks to many Indian looking men, Tara discovers that no one had come to receive her. Similarly, the imagined familiarity of the subway stops people from having a meaningful conversation.

Markets

The market is a place open to all and witnesses a lot of people on an everyday basis. When it comes to immigrant communities, markets serve a more important role.

The Korean American community has long been extolled as entrepreneurs. In the 1970s, a typical newly-arrived family would start a small business as soon as possible after a few years of work on assembly lines or with maintenance companies. The post-1965 wave of immigrants were mostly educated and had held jobs back home. In the US, language often acted as a barrier on their way to finding a satisfactory job. Therefore, they would opt to engage in small business, wherein they could exercise some amount of agency. Within the racial hierarchy of American business structure, Korean-Americans held a position lower than non-Hispanic whites and higher than other minority groups (Blacks and Hispanics). Staying in the competition often implied mobilizing family labour and backbreaking hard work for long hours.

Under such circumstances, the marketplace is no longer a non-place at least for the owners of the place. It becomes an extension of one's home:

> The twenty-four-hour market. The sleep-deprived wife behind the cash register. The bossy husband in a baseball cap hauling boxes in the back. The confused customers gesturing to workers, none of whom speak English. (*Interpreter* 144)

The constant tiredness, the frequent job changes as well as change of homes are all acceptable to an immigrant family because they know their final goal – to own a shop of their own. The market in that sense is similar to the subway – just as the subway or the airport are escapes as well as a way to escape, the market offers many hopefuls the opportunity to work out of it, and then own it.

The relentless aspiration to be rich drives the more ambitious of these people:

> He also stopped doing the delivery work and hired someone instead. He was now practically running the whole store. Both our wives were behind the cash registers, since your father installed a second one for the night shift. I told him it was a bad idea. It'd only exhaust everyone. Seven days a week is one thing, but twenty-four hours? (238)

The market becomes a family business demanding round the clock hours from its owner, who fail to realize that the price is higher than the return:

> Suzy is not sure if her parents had always been so uninterested in each other, or if they just ran out of things to say over the years. It did not help that they were always tired. By the time they came home, around nine or ten, they had been working for over twelve hours. (121)

So the market despite being a non-place comes to stand for much more in the life of the family. For Korean Americans, the market has another significance. The Rodney King incident of '92 made obvious the sharp animosity between Korean Americans and blacks. And the brunt of it was borne by small business owners:

> ... Suzy knew that many Korean fruit-and-vegetable stores crumbled in the early nineties. Especially after the Los Angeles riots of '92, relations between Koreans and blacks were at their worst. Over eight hundred Korean stores were destroyed in South Central. Many were torched in Flatbush and Bedford-Stuyvesant. Back then, it was not unusual to find a circle of picketers outside a Korean market, which inevitably drove a store out of business. It was also around then that the Labor Department began cracking down on Korean markets for breaking minimum-wage laws or hiring illegal immigrants, which Suzy learned later through her interpreting. (241)

Korean American literature post 1992 records many instances of the conflict between Blacks and Koreans in the United States. Chang-Rae Lee's *Native Son* showcases the deep suspicion with which the two communities hold each other. Ty Pak in her short story "The Court Interpreter" gives a fictionalized account of the trial of Soon Ja Du. Du was a Korean store-keeper who ended up killing fifteen-year-old Latasha Harlins, an African American young woman when Harlins attacked her on being caught stealing. This incident also finds its way into *The Interpreter* in the character of Jung Soon Choi who kills a sixteen year old for stealing. The aftermath of such incidents is that markets become a site of resistance. Markets do not just remain a place where you coexist; under the circumstances, it becomes a target of identity politics.

The market area in *Desirable Daughters* presents another interesting aspect. The Jackson Heights presented here captures the very sights and sounds of the place:

> … sidewalks full of Indians, every face is Indian, every shop and storefront features Indian jewelry, Indian clothing, Indian travel, Indian food and spices, Indian sweets and restaurants. The smells and the noises are familiar; Seventy-eighth Street and all the side streets are clogged by double-parked cars and delivery vans. (198)

The Indian character of the place comes alive in the description. As the narrator says, every "dutiful Indian" (198) knows the place.

But Jackson Heights is not just a place that sells stuff. It is the place where things are transformed by repackaging:

> It's still a shock, however, and a kind of inspiration, to see the might of one's community on parade. The swagger is subtle, and perfectly Indian. Poky little storefronts for sweets and spices that look marginal at best are shipping tons of the hot mix out the back door, repackaged in French and Spanish, English, Hindi, Urdu, and any other language, for every Indian specialty store in North America. Every little storefront that looks no more impressive than it might have in India, dim, cluttered, badly painted, indifferently displayed, has an "office" somewhere in the rear where a computer-savvy nephew expands the online client base by factors of several thousand. Travel agents, whose idea of dècor is a Scotch-taped Air-India poster on the wall, issue dozens of India-bound tickets every hour, from every airport on the continent. (199-200)

The Indian businesses in Jackson Heights operate similarly to the Korean businesses in that these too are family run affairs, their success a result of the entire family pitching in together. Also the business of the place is not limited by its physical boundary as the example of the travel agents show.

The idea of the market place is further complicated in this text by the "party" (187) at the Ghosal's mansion in Basking Ridge. The party is ostentatiously held in honour of Tara, the *chhoto bon* of Padma. Because of this, Padma takes Tara for a complete makeover at Jackson Heights as Padma is not satisfied with the way Tara looks:

> ... we left Dhiren-da's with half a dozen cases slipped into Didi's purse, bangles for me, earrings and choker for her, my Byzantium set and dangling, jhumka earrings, and even a nose jewel for Didi. Dhiren-da had not tendered a bill, Didi had not signed a paper or presented a credit card, although the total must have exceeded twenty thousand dollars. (206)

Tara is astounded by such a way of business transaction. She cannot understand why someone would hand over such expensive jewellery without any security.

What she did not know was that it is actually a business venture her sister has masterminded. Padma is a television personality and she exploits that to further her business:

> So Padma thought up these parties as a kind of home shopping service for upscale Indians. There's an economic benefit for participating merchants, but the social values far outweigh it. And so, from time to time, we throw these parties so that the community can sample these styles in saris and jewelry that they might be missing by being out of Bengal. (231)

This home shopping business is not limited to the Bengali community alone but is carried out in the Gujarati, Punjabi and Maharashtrian communities as well.

At the party, Tara quickly gets the hang of what is expected of her which is to display the champakali necklace along with the other jewellery in the most appealing manner, in a generous show of skin so that the necklace becomes more desirable by association:

> "What a fabulous necklace!" he cooed. His date asked, "May I?" and laid her cool fingers between the gold and intimate parts of my body. I willed myself into iciness. I'd not been pawed in public before. (247-48)

The home of a family is thus transformed into a market space where the rules of the market prevail. Tara is nothing more than an impersonal model for the designs that she is wearing for those who choose to have a detailed look at her jewellery. At the same time, she is aware of the impact that her lowered sari edge has on the gathered men. In fact, it is this impact that actually pushes the men to bid for the jewellery. Padma strips Tara off her jewellery in a dark corner at the party itself.

Thus it is seen how regular places of mobility like the airport or the subway, as well as typical places/non-places like the church or markets are being used by immigrants in quite unusual ways. It is seen that Asian American fiction is replete with descriptions of different places. The twenty-first century has witnessed the spread of international migration into the very hinterland of the country, into areas that were so far untouched by the influence of migration. New migration literature reveals the struggle that immigrants experience as they navigate the contrary urge to feel rooted to a place – to find a place of their own in the new land – while at the same time relishing the freedom that comes from not belonging to a place. This contradiction is at the root of the placelessness that marks the immigrant experience.

Ethnic enclaves originate as a result of the threat felt by minorities in a strange land. Kay Anderson in her study of the Chinatown in Vancouver traces its formation. She examines how the idea of inferiority and difference come to define these places. Ethnic ghettoes are not symbolic of the essence of a particular community, in fact such places are "ideologically constructed as places of difference" (qtd. in Creswell, *Place* 28). As time passes, such places because of their isolation become further exoticized in the human imagination. But the reality of lived experience within these ghettoes continues to be detrimental to the overall growth of its inhabitants – hindering as it does the complete immersion into the mainstream culture of the land. This has led to immigrants in contemporary times opting out of living a life inside such enclaves. The texts studied in this chapter holds up this idea. Although the texts portray different ethnic conclaves, the primary characters are seen to have moved away or rather escaped from what they see as decadence that has gnawed its way into such places. Life in such conclaves implies strict conformity to the values of the community. These values become increasingly questionable to children raised in the values of American independence that penetrates through the school system. In *Buddha in the Attic*, Julie Otsuka gives a poignant many-voiced description of Japanese children raised in the United States who refuse to adhere

to the traditional values of the family once they start going to school. This is a usual occurrence in most immigrant families, but is particularly confusing for families residing within ethnic ghettoes because they themselves have no access to the new values that their children have accepted. This is the case with Suzy and Grace Park as well as with the Chhung children. Their life is simply no longer possible inside the confines of an ethnic ghetto.

It has long been held that practice produces place. But the character of a place can inspire practices too. Doreen Massey talks about how "in its broadest formulation, society is necessarily constructed spatially, and that fact - the spatial organization of society - makes a difference to how it works" (*Space, Place and Gender* 254). Going further, one can say that place also produces the individual or more specifically a place can sustain only a particular type of people, increasingly based on their work skill. This is why a high tech region like the Silicon Valley necessitates the large presence of highly skilled workers and an even larger number of menial workers. As an unsurprising corollary to the presence of two such economically disparate groups, crime becomes a common practice in the area. This is a familiar motif that is seen in almost all big cities. California and New York as presented in the texts discussed in this chapter are thus hotbeds of crime.

Harner contends that place identity is the result of a "collective understanding about social identity intertwined with place meaning" (qtd. in Barcus and Brunn 284). He also considers place identity as a cultural value shared by a community. Place identity, and thereby meaning, seems to lessen with the rise of the individual. The studied texts seem to celebrate the idea of placelessness within a place as heroic. When Tara mentions about her life at her new home, "I feel not just invisible but heroically invisible, a border-crashing claimant of all people's legacies", she contradictorily privileges the "I" while claiming "all people's legacies" (*Desirable* 79). Unlike the critic's regret over the growth of placelessness, the detachment to place, contemporary immigrants thrive in that dissociation from all places. With such dissociation comes the freedom to be anywhere – the world then indeed becomes one's oyster. Although this sense of placelessness evolves out of a life of trials and tribulations, and their placelessness shall forever be marked with an undertone of regret and loss, yet all the immigrants considered in the course of this chapter – Suzy, Grace, Hattie, Sophy, Mum, Tara – cling on to the idea of placelessness as their only way of life.

Thus it is seen that as far as the Asian American community is concerned, each place they go to or find themselves in evinces a sense of an affective community. People tend to land in places which are welcoming, and this sense of acceptability is often present amongst people of the same ethnicity. What makes a place friendly or unwelcome depends on the physical location as well as the people living there. However, places do not remain the same: they change along with the changes in the people. The same place may appear unfeeling to newcomers but rise to show great caring during moments of crisis. As people get to know a place, it contributes to the shaping of their identities. Thus place, like space, is seen as the product of interrelations. The same place may have different kinds of significance for different people or its meaning for the same individual may change from time to time. But more significantly, the same place may offer a complex layering of significance like Foucault's garden as shown in the body of the chapter. Places present themselves as heterotopias just as it is possible for a person to look for more than one place to connect with and connect with the same place at different levels.

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