

CHAPTER FIVE

RECONSTITUTING COMMUNITY, RECLAIMING IDENTITY

The concept of a people is not 'given', as an essential, class-determined, unitary, homogeneous part of society *prior to a politics*; 'the people' are there as a process of political articulation and political negotiation across a whole range of contradictory social sites. 'The people' always exist as a multiple form of identification, waiting to be created and constructed. (Bhabha, "The Third Space," Rutherford, *Identity: Community, Culture, Difference* 220)

The notion of hybridity... is about the fact that in any particular political struggle, new sites are always being opened up, and if you keep referring those new sites to old principles, then you are not actually able to participate in them fully and productively and creatively. (Bhabha 216)

Cultural identity...is a matter of 'becoming' as well as of 'being'. It belongs to the future as much as to the past. It is not something which already exists, transcending place, time, history and culture. Cultural identities come from somewhere, have histories. But, like everything which is historical, they undergo constant transformation. Far from being eternally fixed in some essentialised past, they are subject to the continuous 'play' of history, culture and power.

(Stuart Hall, "Cultural Identity and Diaspora," Rutherford 225)

The aim of this chapter is to examine the complexities of identity formation in migration fiction based on three immigrant communities – Indian American, Chinese American and Korean American. It contends that the concept of identity is intrinsically connected to the idea of the migrant community as well as the greater American society. This chapter considers the changing role of community in contemporary migration fiction and what it means for the individual living within such communities. It tries to comment on the ever changing dynamics between the two while trying to understand the changing significance of the community for succeeding generations. The texts chosen for the purpose are *Bone* (1993) by Fae Myenne Ng, *The Interpreter* (2003) by Suki Kim and *The Sleepwalker's Guide to Dancing* (2014) by Mira Jacob. All of them present the negotiations of individuals with their communities in different ways as they try to carve an identity for themselves.

Before proceeding to an analysis of the chosen texts it would not be out of place here to

examine the nature of diasporic identities. As pointed out by Françoise Král in *Critical Identities in Contemporary Anglophone Diasporic Literature*,

One of the specificities of diasporic literature...is its capacity to pinpoint the zones of disjunction between definitions of identity – which somehow never seem nuanced enough—and identity definitions as they are spelled out by countries. Understanding identity, and not only diasporic identity but also shifting contemporary identities, is therefore as much about the zones of congruence between given models and actual situations as it is about interstices and zones of non-conformity with existing models. (31)

What Král suggests is that there are disjunctions between established norms and gradually emerging types of identity in such situations. Given the cultural and political, not to mention social complexities of the immigrant communities in America, it is seen that instead of complete assimilation, or disavowal as seen in some of the militant migrant groups, there are shades and levels of acculturation and dissociation amongst the migrated settlers. While they speak the language and dress in the manner of other Americans, their food habits, religious practices and other social customs are often governed by the culture (diluted somewhat), of their erstwhile homeland. While the people are settled in America, their cultural ties to their earlier roots, ensure that they do not wish to be completely identified as Americans. This makes for complexities in identity formation which have been studied by numerous thinkers.

Stuart Hall tries to look at identity from different positions:

There are at least two different ways of thinking about ‘cultural identity’. The first position defines ‘cultural identity’ in terms of one, shared culture, a sort of collective ‘one true self’, hiding inside the many other, more superficial or artificially imposed ‘selves’, which people with a shared history and ancestry hold in common. Within the terms of this definition, our cultural identities reflect the common historical experiences and shared cultural codes which provide us, as ‘one people’, with stable, unchanging and continuous frames of reference and meaning, beneath the shifting divisions and vicissitudes of our actual history. This ‘oneness’, underlying all the other, more superficial differences, is the truth, the essence.... (Rutherford 223)

What Hall implies is that sometimes people have to live with imposed collective identities as a result of colonialism and have to struggle to shed those impositions in the

dprocess of decolonization. Instead of cultural identities imposed from without as in the case of the African people who had to live with the culture bomb of imperialism—being forced to use a foreign language—under colonial rule as Ngugi points out, these people can look into their shared pasts and retrieve and reclaim their ethnic identities or one common African identity as the case may be (*Decolonizing the Mind* 3).

Hall then discusses the other type of identity which he examines in the context of the Caribbean:

This second position recognises that, as well as the many points of similarity, there are also critical points of deep and significant *difference* which constitute ‘what we really are’; or rather - since history has intervened - ‘what we have become’. We cannot speak for very long, with any exactness, about ‘one experience, one identity’, without acknowledging its other side—the ruptures and discontinuities which constitute, precisely, the Caribbean’s ‘uniqueness’.
(225)

As Hall points out, there are differences of identity within a larger group identity as there is a layering of identity traits marking changes from what they were and what they are in the present. Cultural identities have histories but also undergo transformation as Hall contends. Identities are not fixed but keep evolving as they are “subject to the continuous ‘play’ of history, culture and power” in culturally complex diasporic situations within America (Hall 225). Chambers echoes Hall in his observation that:

In the migrant landscapes of contemporary metropolitan cultures...re-situating, reciting and representing common signs in the circuits between speech, image and oblivion, a constant struggling into sense and history is pieced together. It is a history that is continually being decomposed and recomposed in the interlacing between what we have inherited and where we are. (*Migrancy, Culture, Identity* 15)

Neither identity nor community can be taken as complete or fixed or stable. Rather, there is a process of continuous negotiation between the past and a present which is in a state of becoming.

Agreeing that diasporic or immigrant identities are not stable, Inderpal Grewal observes that they are formed through “strategic essentialism”:

Since identities are always “strategic” we need to examine how “strategic essentialism” addresses either the problem of essentialism or the operations of power upon subjects; furthermore it is not clear what levels of self-consciousness are needed to make essentialism strategic or not and whether assuming a “strategic” consciousness about identity is the only way in which power can be negotiated. Which subject-positions can be invested to produce an identity is a question of power that has to be understood within a force field of regulated subject positions and institutions. Although all identities are formed through strategic essentialism, they are neither stable nor ahistorical. They exist to enact specific kinds of agency through the exercise of power. If subjects are formed through the work of institutions and discourses, then these subjects become identities only through identification with already constituted or newly perceptible identities and in response to technologies of regulatory power. (*Transnational America* 13-14)

According to her, identities are need based as they fulfil specific kinds of agency. They are either determined by essentialism or power operating within a nexus.

The hypotheses that govern this chapter are:

- i) that identities in migration fiction are not fixed and are in a state of becoming;
- ii) that identities are made up of discontinuities and ruptures;
- iii) that the thinking subject emerges out of a conflict of values between the community and the self;
- iv) that the individual is put at a disadvantage by the very values that the community forces on him or her.

Amongst the novels included in this chapter, *Bone* depicting the immigration scene from before 1965 in a Chinese American neighbourhood reveals the dual role of the community as both saviour and predator when it comes to the individual. *The Interpreter* in turn reveals how the community (Korean American) is played on by unscrupulous people in pursuit of their nefarious agenda. *The Sleepwalker's Guide to Dancing* in contrast reveals the strength that comes from a closely knit Indian American community but it challenges the very nature of community by refusing to adhere to the unity of place or ethnicity.

This chapter tries to examine the formation of community and the reclaiming of identity in Asian American migration fiction. It is seen that consequent upon migration and settling down in a new land the people need to redefine their sense of self and community. For this they need to establish ties and common values with people around them, especially those who share similar experiences and cultures. The longing for the familiarity of home results in attempts at assimilation with people who might well have been considered the “other” back home.

“Community,” as explained by Tyler in *Returning (to) Communities*, indicates the claim by “people of a locality to their own distinct identity. Another strong use of the term is made by groups asserting identity, not on the grounds of locality, but in terms of some form of common origin. The most common of these is the idea of *ethnic community*....But this sense of community may also be adopted by groups with other shared, inherited characteristics. A third (more recent) development, modelled on these uses, asserts the identity of groups diverse in location or origin, but common in their commitment or vocation, such as *professional communities* (farming, scientific communities), or *faith communities* (Christian, Moslem communities), or *recreational communities* (gaming, rambling communities). Here, “community” is claiming recognition within the social system” (24). Tyler further suggests that:

The *term* “community” therefore plays its part in power relations. So also do the *relationships* signified by the concept in its strong sense. In fact, Michel Foucault has argued for an approach to *power* as a matter of relationships. He has rejected the traditional notion of power as something which may be possessed, which is held by the few, and which is deployed negatively, as a prohibition on the many. On the contrary, he has argued that power is *pervasive*, that is, it is implicated in all our relationships, we are constantly engaged with others in tactics of power, whether at work or at home, or shopping or leisure. And power is *productive*, that is, it is a positive force in society. Foucault describes power as “action upon action”...the impact each of us has on what others do. Thus, everything we achieve with others is enabled by power relations. (26)

It follows that a community operates on power relations, on controlling others or being controlled. Tyler goes on to say that “Communities then are *loose systems*, alliances of strategic relations, weaving between, linking and challenging, power blocks and

dominations” (26). A community maintains a set of norms and social sanctions to protect them.

Community, in this chapter implies, a “community of people”, as a force behind the individual. The community and the people who form it share a symbiotic relationship. But too often the community comes to act as a restrictive agent in the desires of the individual. When that happens, the individual stops identifying with the community, outliving the necessity of belonging to such a community. Since old notions of community are changing, identities both individual and social also change. Community is no longer a people defined by unitary attributes as commonality of place, origin or ethnicity.

In earlier times when the world was comparatively less mobile, one’s community tended to be comprised of people around one’s physical location. It is only natural that one finds a sense of belonging in people who share a similar background, and the primary similarity among people in that context is one’s place of origin. But as mobility became the defining character of the modern world, one’s sense of community too started to change.

Among immigrants, the significance of ethnic communities varies from individual to individual or family to family, depending on their socio-economic status. This, despite the fact that communities sometimes play an active role in supporting or even managing the business interests of its members. For instance, Portes and Rumbaut record that certain immigrant communities, particularly South Asian communities, consider themselves “part of supportive ethnic networks”, as opposed to the Mexican community that reports little support from their community that ultimately results in “cumulative disadvantages” (*Legacies* 110-11). This support mechanism is also seen in the Korean American communities.

Portes and Rumbaut talk about the influence of community in immigrant families. Their study reveals that the social capital resulting from a closely knit community goes a long way in deciding the success of its members. It is the “density of ties”, according to them, that determines the socio-economic success of immigrants. They maintain that tightly knit communities become a source of support for individual families not merely in terms of networking, but more importantly such ties help in indirectly supporting the “good”

norms of the homeland by celebrating parental control, parents' hopes for their young, etc. (65).

Earlier immigrants to the United States tended to form a community with shared values, as they looked for moorings in the new land. The need to connect with a community or larger group arose from the fear and insecurity of being isolated in a land far away from home. This coming together could have different reasons like a commonality of language, ethnicity, region, nation, religion, etc. This is one direct reason behind the rise of various ethnic localities across the world and more specifically in the United States, famed for its immigrant character. These locations often act as the landing cum launching pad for new immigrants. As evidenced in Bharati Mukherjee's *Jasmine*, such a place can indirectly help an immigrant to get used to the American situation by acting as a sheltered space from which one can gradually venture out into the wider world.

This is especially seen in the case of immigrants to the United States with a particular background depending on whether they are undocumented, unskilled, or forced. The post 1965 Asian immigration into the United States saw a change in the character and relevance of the community. With more and more skilled workers coming in, the appeal of the community diminishes and in certain instances assumes greater significance for the individual. While the sense of community is stronger amongst the older generation of Asian Americans, the younger people are seen striking out on their own, away from home and community.

With earlier immigrants the sense of community was directly connected to a sense of place. Immigrants with family ties to people in the United States most frequently ended up there. Thus clusters of people centred around one individual in a particular place are created. This remains true even today when new unskilled immigrants enter the United States without the security of a job in hand only in the hope of a shared space. For instance, in Shanthi Sekaran's *Lucky Boy* based in contemporary times, we see how the character Soli enters the United States illegally from Mexico. Her destination is not a place but a person – her cousin who works as a maid. She trusts that her cousin would help her find employment in something similar. Immigrants like Soli are also inspired by the news, false and true, of their erstwhile neighbour's success after moving to the United States.

One's job determines where one ends up in the United States. This is one trend that can

be seen in all the novels. Since most of the contemporary immigration to the United States is job oriented no matter the country of origin, the job market is seen to determine the location of immigrant communities. The place based communities were formed as a result of this. The network based immigration model ensured that immigrants would physically concentrate in areas where they have more job opportunities (Gerber 92). With the 1965 change in the immigration act that paved the way for more skilled people to come in, the distribution of immigrants underwent a change as now their absorption was happening in out of the way places, in small towns apart from urban spaces. That is why the characters in the novels under study range from a not so popular in the imagination, Albuquerque, to popular destinations like California and New York. But for the unskilled immigrants their pattern of residence continues to follow the earlier practices. Thus, the impact of the job market makes itself felt in the pattern of immigrant settlement as pointed out earlier by Grewal. The earlier ethnic community is giving way to a community based on market needs for skilled and semi-skilled workers.

Although the community is supposed to provide support to the individual, in certain cases it is seen that the individual exploits the community for his own selfish gain. This is seen in the novels taken up for discussion in this chapter. All three texts address issues of assimilation and alienation, like the rest of migration/diasporic literature. The nature of the community in all three texts is very different comprising as it does only three families in *The Sleepwalker's Guide to Dancing*, and an entire Koreatown and Chinatown in *The Interpreter* and *Bone*, respectively. However they engage with the old themes in a new way and destabilize the very idea of an immigrant identity by stripping away all assumptions linking one to a communal past.

In this context Moslund's observations on migration novels intentionally producing "hybrid discourses that radically destabilise meaning and identity," may be cited:

Typically such readings propose the contemporary transnational and transcultural migrant as...a new kind of fluid, complex, multiple, open, inclusive identity, replacing old identities and cosmologies of stability and belonging with the uncertainty of a liminal position in-between two or several cultures. By virtue of these qualities the transcultural migrant hero is assumed to be endowed with a special, inclusive vision and sensibility, a double-vision that is particularly conducive for the heterogeneous complexity and perspectival

uncertainty of novelistic modes of representation. (*Migration Literature and Hybridity* 6)

According to Moslund, the contemporary migrant is regarded as transcultural with a complex, fluid identity as he negotiates the pressures of dominant as well as marginal cultures to arrive at a sense of being. Given his openness to becoming rather than just being, the migrant's identity which undergoes different levels of consolidation and change evinces characteristics which place him neither in the centre nor on the margin but in an in-between, interstitial space. This is the hybrid space of Bhabha which Tabish Khair as cited by Moslund extends to include a continuous sense of becoming:

hybridization is not the same as hybrid. Hybridization is an active term that connotes an on-going process, while the hybrid...is a static description. The hybrid *is*; it is not the endless process of *becoming*. (qtd. in Moslund 14)

These novels address issues of troublesome identities as the characters with their exposure to and memories of different cultures are caught between being and becoming. Community comes to play diverse yet significant roles in the contexts of the three above mentioned novels. In fact the very notion of community is challenged so that its connotation becomes unstable. We see how in the course of the narratives, community life is adhered to but also rejected, in one case because of convenience, in the other, because of power; instead of being a support system, the community at times becomes a medium to be exploited.

The community is a source of strength for newly arrived immigrants in a foreign land. Not only does it provide invaluable emotional support to replace the social capital that one misses out on while relocating to a new land, it also helps to espouse the conventional norms of the people. For parents particularly, the community may come to be a major support in bringing up children. This it does, not merely by looking after the children physically, which can be a huge help for working parents who do not have the advantages of a big family to share the duties, but more importantly, by acting as a cementing factor by upholding the values of family responsibility as well as other socio-cultural values. Given the formalities and restrictions on immigration to the United States, those who manage to make their way there, find it still convenient to draw upon the support system of the community he relates to.

People not familiar with English tend to live in closely knit communities, feeling safer in

numbers. The disadvantage of not knowing the language, as seen in some of the East Asian immigrants, thrusts these people into mutual dependence. While this situation is normally beneficial to the newcomers, it is seen in novels like *The Interpreter* that they may fall victim in the hands of unscrupulous members of their own ethnic community. While the community appears to prize the values of loyalty, mutual responsibility and cooperation, there might be members within it who act against its interests. The Korean community depicted in the novel is not particularly affluent and it is riddled with the evils of gang wars and poverty:

Korean gangs...tend to keep a lower profile....They might occasionally do some dirty work for the big guys, but mostly they keep to their own. They raid their own Korean communities, who are infamous for never using banks, just hoarding cash in their homes. Easier for them, since Koreans rarely report gang crimes. The AOCTF calls it a ‘collective shame.’ A sort of responsibility, immigrant guilt for not having properly reared their second generation. (*Interpreter* 182)

The fact that Korean gangs target their own community, capitalising on its weaknesses that as insiders they are only too aware of, reveals the failure of the community to instil the ethical codes in its own people. The world outside too judges the community because of this, referring to it as a “collective shame” which the community tries to hide by not reporting such crimes to the police, out of a sense of shame. It may be mentioned that AOCTF refers to Asian Organized Crime Task Force which acts as a controlling mechanism against such offences.

At times, the community served individuals without directly coming into contact with them, or almost against their wish. The community after all represents a culture as well as people:

The subculture of immigrants had nothing much to do with the rest of America. When the girls took sick, Mom would get a concoction from a local Korean pharmacy where they never asked for a prescription. When Dad lost his appetite, he would visit an herbalist in Astoria for a dose of bear’s galls. When her parents had some money they could put away, which was hardly ever, they would turn not to a bank but to a *gae*, which was a Korean communal-savings pool where a monthly lottery was drawn to grant the winner a lump sum. It was beyond Suzy’s understanding why her parents, like most Korean elders,

preferred Maxwell House instant coffee to fresh coffee, or why they wouldn't touch grapefruits or mangoes, though they kept boxes of dried persimmons at home. (165)

It was as if people were looking for cultural ties which were clearly not American. The Park family maintained a deliberate distance from the community. Mr. Park ensured that his wife and daughters were kept strictly away from outside influence, engaged as he was in the horrible agenda of reporting unauthorized immigrants to the Immigration and Naturalization Services (INS). For practical reasons he chooses to maintain some distance from the Korean American community but his cultural preferences and habits ensure that he does not sever all links with it. His decision to invest his money in a *gae* as opposed to a bank reveals the community's pull on him.

Yet he succeeds in alienating his daughters from the community because of his early insistence on their maintaining a distance from community life. The following lines reveal how cultural knowledge is missed out when one is disconnected from the community:

Had she stayed in just one neighborhood long enough, had she been allowed to build intimacy with one friend, one neighbor, one relative, then perhaps this perpetual Korea, which hovered somewhere in the Far East, might have seemed more relevant. She kept up with the language. She followed the custom. But knowing about a culture was different from feeling it. She would bow to the elders without the traditional respect such bows required. She would bite into the pungent spice of *kimchi* without tasting its sad, sour history. She would bob her head to the drumbeats of the Korean folk songs without commiserating with their melancholy. But how could she? She recalled nothing of the country. (165)

Constantly moving houses rendered the Park family perpetual strangers; not allowing the children to bond with the community renders the second generation incapable of identifying with or appreciating their ethnic background. They knew nothing of life in Korea, yet their father's strict injunction to live a life that adheres to the Korean way succeeds in making them obedient daughters. At the same time, it fails to give them a sense of their ethnic culture. The girls do what they are required to do but without any sense of reason behind it. They are expected to reject American culture to which they are exposed, and follow Korean culture which they imbibed from their parents as they did not mix with other Korean Americans. This gives them partial knowledge or creates

confusion regarding the rightness of things, given their parents' secretive existence. It also leads to confusion and ambivalence regarding their future actions. The elder daughter, Grace, is caught between Korean values which are ingrained in her and her disapproval of her father's actions which she feels are wrong. The tension between two different cultures and philosophies leads Grace to kill the man she loves because she learns that he killed her parents to free her from their corrupt influence. Despite the knowledge that her parents had done grievous harm to members of their community and behaved in a totally reprehensible manner, Grace finds that Korean cultural values are deeply rooted in her. She has to answer those claims as a dutiful daughter and avenge their killing. In so doing, she turns her back on a future and an American way of life.

In *Bone*, the community is responsible for instilling the values of parental authority in its members. Unlike *The Interpreter*, the three daughters in *Bone* grow up in the midst of Chinatown, negotiating the Chinese way of life in the United States. The community plays a strong role in the lives of all the characters in the course of the text.

When Leon, the father, opens a joint dry cleaning business with Ong, they do not go for any legal arrangement choosing instead to trust the other's integrity. This eventually results in the entire family going bankrupt as the business fails because of Ong:

We knew not to ask anything right then. I knew the money was gone. Leon and Luc had only shaken hands on the deal. There was no contract, no legal partnership. I blamed myself. I should have done more; I should have made them go to a lawyer to set the business up. But I hadn't. Mah and Leon seemed so high on the idea, I didn't want to bring in doubt. It was their business, and if they wanted to do things the Chinatown way, if they wanted to depend on old-world trust, I don't think it was my place to interfere. (170)

This refusal of Leila to speak out even when she knows better arises from the values instilled by the community that does not allow a child to question their parents' affair. Leila feels awkward about interfering or offering advice because it would place her in a position where she would be seen as interrogating the culture of her parents. They had to learn the hard way that such customs and values are untenable in the American situation. The community in many minute ways imprints such values in its members, values that parents alone cannot instill in their children.

It may be noted that Leon thinks of a partnership with a fellow Chinese because of his

inability to find a decent job on land. He has to return to sea each time he gets an offer because he knows of no job that would be available to him for any length of time. His lack of proper education or the ability to speak English properly are other drawbacks, not to say his age, in getting a steady permanent job requiring his mechanical skills. It is seen that while the workplace allows the immigrant the possibility of settling down with a steady income if they are lucky, the rigidities of the migration laws ensure that even after years of settling in America, these onetime immigrants remain vulnerable or are reminded of their vulnerability by the cynical enforcement of the law.

This cynicism is evident in the refusal/inability of the police in *The Interpreter*, to inquire thoroughly into the murder of the Park couple in Koreatown, New York. Because of the complicated life led by Mr. Park as an informer, the INS is happy to use his services but once he is killed, the matter is treated as “done and dusted” and soon relegated to the cold cases file. In the same novel the predicament of Mrs. Choi brings out the trauma an immigrant has to undergo if he or she does not have the right papers. Mrs. Choi had come to America as a student but could not complete her studies as her parents went bankrupt and could not support her. Since then she had been living in America for twenty eight years as a permanent resident. She had married, given birth to a daughter, and continued in a loveless and unhappy marriage working with her husband in their green grocery shop. Since she had been living in America for so long she thought she had the right to defend her property. So when she catches a girl stealing things from her shop who moreover, hurls racial abuse at her on being stopped, she instinctively uses the salad knife with which she had been chopping fruit, to stab the girl in her shoulder. Had the dispute taken place between two Americans, it would have been a simple matter of theft and attack in self defence. Mrs. Choi, however, is treated as a dangerous criminal and put in prison for three years before she is produced in court to get the order for her deportation. This is how Suzy Park comes across her in the course of her job as interpreter during the final hearing.

It does not matter to the judge and the lawyers that the woman is fifty eight years old or that her offence was committed in self defence when the teenage thief punched her repeatedly. She had been condemned and that was it. Nobody is interested in what happens to her next. She is described in the following manner: “Her gauntness is alarming....Her wizened face carries the yellowish hue of someone who hasn’t breathed

fresh air for a long time” (*The Interpreter* 265). Suzy learns that the woman was a music graduate but had been doing manual work along with acting as a cashier in the United States. This leads Suzy to reflect on the condition of immigrants in America:

A man who owns a dry cleaner’s might have once been an architect or a pedicurist at a local nail salon might be a trained pharmacist....Most of them never get over the shame of being relegated to the working class. (268)

Returning to the courtroom scene, we find that Mrs. Choi refuses to answer most of the questions or chooses to tell them what they believed about her when the incident occurred. When the judge asks Mrs. Choi: “You do realize that, in the case of a green-card holder, an aggravated felony is grounds for removal?” she replies:

“I’ve served almost three years in jail. I’ve lost everything. My husband, my daughter, my store. If that didn’t kill me, nothing will.” (273)

She had made up her mind that there was no chance of any sympathy from anyone. The official lawyer tries to get her to react to information about her unhappy home life:

Mrs. Choi’s face reveals nothing. Theirs was not a happy home, obviously, which is exactly what the INS attorney wants Judge Williams to consider. No one’s breaking their home. They did that for themselves. Green cards were never meant for such undesirables. (274)

After that it was a mere formality for the judge to issue the order. Watching all this Suzy is left to ponder over the whole problem:

Relief was never a possibility. Deportation had begun the minute she stabbed that girl. She should have known better. Immigrants are not Americans. Permanent residency is never permanent. Anything can happen. (274)

Suzy’s reflections suggest that the Americans also try to fall back on community values to make their actions seem more legitimate. Mrs. Choi’s deportation would affect nobody but herself; in time she would become a part of deportation statistics. Her present status, her identity as Korean American meant nothing to the INS officials or the judge. Human trauma, right and wrong, did not count; nor did documentation. Mrs. Choi’s case, thus, draws attention to the uncertainty and fragility which marks the life of the Asian immigrants, even documented ones, in America. Because of her husband’s indifference there was no resistance or active support from the Korean American community either.

At other times, as in *Bone*, the community helps in inculcating a sense of discipline in the younger people despite the family’s leniency in teaching it. In *Bone*, the community

values are institutionalised and passed on through Chinese schools:

Chinese School was more strict than English School. We got whacked with a yardstick if our lessons weren't memorized. We paid a penny for every forbidden English word we spoke. That was strict. Absolute rules. Absolute punishments.... Mah and Leon had no such thing. They made up rules as they needed them, and changed them all on a whim. ... There were nights we had to speak Chinese at the dinner table and there were other nights we could laugh and talk English all we wanted and even take our bowls out to the front room and eat while watching *I Love Lucy*. One day we could run wild in the alley until way after dark and stay up all night eating candy and watching television.

The next day we had to sew culottes until our eyes crossed. (117)

The community thus comes to play as strong a role in shaping individuals, often taking on the family responsibility of imparting strong values as well as solidifying a set of norms by which to live one's life.

At a time of utter despair, it is the community that can come to support the individual particularly in a foreign land where even one's own children are alienated from their parent's culture. At Ona's wake, it is the sewing ladies alone who could reach Mah in her grief. Although grief is personal, the way a person grieves is very much determined by a culture. Mah's grieving could find comfort only in the words and actions of the sewing ladies who knew all about what needs to be done to provide comfort to a grieving heart:

Hearing her personal name must have soothed Mah. She nodded, listening as they told her what she had to do. They knew all the necessary rituals to get through this hard time... Bringing the right foods was as delicate as saying the right words. The sewing ladies knew, in ways I was still watching and *learning* from, how to draw out Mah's sadness and then take it away. (105)

Leila is forced to acknowledge the fact that the sewing ladies could draw upon their culture to reach out to her mother in her distress. This points to the resilience of the community which is remarkable amongst African Americans as well. For example, Morrison presents the support of the community in *Beloved*, as the people help Denver and Sethe with food and other means of support. The Chinese community in *Bone* offers both emotional and physical support when a family faces bereavement. It allows an individual or family to get its bearings right in times of stress and confusion. Leila understands that she still has a lot to learn from the community—from practical day-to-

day living to death rituals. The community is the living embodiment of archival memory, only too eager to pass on its knowledge to the new generations.

The essence of community is beautifully brought out in *The Sleepwalker's Guide to Dancing* by juxtaposing the plight of three Indian families in New Mexico against the backdrop of a Native American side story. Even more than the main story, the side story of the Puyallup tribe shows the consequences of what happens when the individual forgets to take into account the community's consciousness. It reveals once again the superiority of the values that conduct a community of people and the price one has to pay for not abiding by it:

The land—18,000 acres that were allotted to them in the Treaty of Medicine Creek in 1854 and then slowly poached in a series of “negotiations” that left them on about 33 acres by 1934—was their birthright. Taking money for it was a direct refutation of that right, and of everything their ancestors had stood for. It would only bring harm, even if it did give every member of the tribe twenty thousand dollars right away. (98)

Bobby McCloud, the 36 year old leader of the tribal community, an alumnus of the University of Washington, decided to opt for the \$162 million settlement, something that his brother, his cousin and his uncle refused to do. He reasoned that, “Everyone is saying our birthright is the land. Our birthright is to live! It's to succeed, and grow, and watch our children grow” (98). He firmly believed that the money from the settlement would go a long way in empowering the community, creating opportunities for businesses that would lead to the end of their poverty. In his zeal, he forgot to take into account the pitfalls of becoming rich suddenly for a people already ruined by drugs and illiteracy.

As if in answer to Bobby's call, the majority of the people fritter away the money in ostentatious buying sprees and unnecessary expendables. Once the money runs out, the people realise too late that it is the end of opportunities. Without land, they did not even have the hope to survive. In desperation, many people killed themselves. Even Bobby's own uncle and brother committed suicide. In the end, unable to face the consequence of what his decision had done to the community, Bobby too commits suicide, jumping off the George Washington Memorial Bridge, attired in the Cherokee male costume. McCloud leads his community astray on the strength of his rights over the land. This shows that money or land or assets are not enough without the sense to use them

judiciously. They present a contrasting picture to the strife of the migrant who has to struggle to fit in and achieve financial stability.

The values of the community that one imbibes almost unconsciously work in the individual and at times against their desires. When Dimple Kurian falls in love with Sajeev Roy, and both of them decide to get married, Dimple is reluctant to tell her family the news:

“I feel like my parents won,” Dimple said.

“Won what?”

“That’s the funny part. I mean, what did they win, really? So I’m going to end up with a Suriani guy. Sajeev, of all people. So what. I just ... I don’t want to deal with my mom gloating.” (435)

Dimple has always had a strained relationship with her parents, barely talking to them and never coming home. She is the kind of daughter who goes out of the way to disappoint her parents. It is only with her parents’ close friends – Thomas and Sanji – that she feels at home. Sanji particularly acts as the mediator between the two sets of parents and their children. It is she who in her non-intrusive casual way succeeds in imparting the kind of values that keeps the younger generation tied to the older.

It is Sanji again who reinforces the idea of the United States as home among their small community:

“... We are all we have here. Do you understand? That is *it*. And we can all talk about old times and Campa Cola and wouldn’t it be nice if we could go back, but none of us ever want to go back. To what? To who? ... No, we are home already, like it or not, ...” (378)

Sanji’s strong need to believe in their “family” arises from her acceptance, unlike Kamala, that for better or worse they are already home. She understands and accepts that as immigrants they might give in to nostalgia and reminisce about the good old days and ponder over what it would be like to go back, but the truth of the matter is that they are never going back. Life away from “home” has rendered them strangers in that home – so that their presence there becomes an aberration. To Sanji at least therefore New Mexico is home and the extended family comprising of the Balakrishnans, the Eapens and the Kurians her only family. And it is Sanji’s warmth that holds the small community comprising of these three families together. It is again through the childless Sanji that the

parents are able to reach their children, as she single-handedly takes on a parenting role on behalf of them all.

But that is not to say the community is always correct in deciding what is good for the individual. In immigrants, it is not rare to witness the conflict between the will of the individual and the community. In fact the conflict here acquires an extra dimension because the individual often is torn in his/her choice between adhering to norms of the immediate community – ethnic, sociolinguistic or otherwise – and the wider all American identity.

In *The Interpreter*, by the actions of Mr. Park, the idea of the community being a support system is turned on its head. The community is nothing more than a business opportunity for the Park family. With the revelation that Mr. Park was an informer for the Immigration and Naturalization Services (INS), comes the understanding of how he used this position to exploit his partners in business to get his way. Over the years, he had been responsible for the deportation of a lot of illegal immigrants, for breaking up a lot of families. Power becomes the motivating force behind his actions. For the newly arrived non-English speaking immigrant in the States:

Every man is guide to every other man. They don't speak English, or read English. They don't know the American laws. They might even break them without knowing. They are forever guilty before the customers, the policemen, the inspectors, the district attorneys, the IRS agents, the INS agents. Sure, America is the land of opportunity, and yet they wouldn't recognize an opportunity even if it is waved in front of them. Only another immigrant can show them, in their language, in ways they can understand. A fellow countryman who might understand America better, who might be less afraid, who might be legal. (237-38)

And Suzy's father took ruthless advantage of this helpless trust. He worked as a spy for the INS reporting other Koreans who had illegally entered the country. He used his position with the INS to punish anyone who might stand up to him, thus weeding out his competitors, thriving when other businesses failed. To him, financial success was all that counted. He exploited his class, as well as community and family resources to make a dubious success of his life at the cost of his fellow beings.

Suzy struggles with her discoveries as she tries to reconcile herself to her parents'

murder five years ago. The Korean American community, particularly, the ones located inside the Korea towns, was governed by its own code of ethics. Made up of mostly first generation immigrants, these are people who are unfamiliar with English and have to rely on fellow members to connect with the outside world. They continue to cling to their ethnic identity without any desire to engage with or imbibe American culture. The refusal to learn the language is only the surface manifestation of their obdurate and closed attitude to anything new or unusual. It is this which also sets them up for betrayal in the hands of unscrupulous people like Mr. Park.

Years later, we are given a perspective through his daughter's shocked reaction:

Reporting an illegal immigrant is a vicious act, an immoral act. No immigrant can do it to another, knowing the fear, the absolutely mind-numbing fright, that a mere mention of the INS brings to those whose underground existence in the forgotten patches of Lefrak City is a source of a collective paranoia. Could her parents have been capable of such a betrayal? Was it out of greed? Could greed be enough motivation for turning on their own people? (240)

Mr. Park when choosing to report the several "illegal" immigrants to the INS forgets that he owes an ethical responsibility to the people of the community. He absolutely disregards the sufferings of his fellow countrymen who had left a country in search of a better life. Despite knowing the consequences of what happens when someone is taken in by the INS, he continues to do so because that ensured his easy survival. There is no connect with the community at all, they are merely dupes waiting to be victimised by the likes of him. If community in most cases is seen to rally around needy individuals, in the case of Mr. Park, it is one unscrupulous representative who holds the community to ransom.

Suzy Park is told as much by a fellow Korean American who knew her parents:

"Your parents had both the INS and the police behind them. They were basically invincible. Each time someone got deported, someone's store got shut down, someone's life savings got stolen, all anyone could do was just look on and hope that it wouldn't happen to him next. Your parents left them no choice," he says, staring vacantly at nowhere particular, as though he has reached the end of his defense. "Except the gang wasn't supposed to kill ..." (243-44)

The community that he despised, that he exploited, the same community gets together

and hires the “gang” to threaten the Park family. But due to a misunderstanding one of them ends up shooting them. The most interesting aspect of the incident is that the police fail to make any arrest for the murder as mentioned earlier. It is implied that they might have known about the status of the Park family through the INS, but that also ties their hands in the matter. This it seems was known to the community at large who chose to protect the gang rather than seeking justice for the death of the Park couple. To the community as one man the Parks were simply not one of them.

The scenario presented by this novel exposes the vulnerability of immigrant life as they can at any moment have their status questioned with their identities being compromised. Despite their proximity to the community, the Park sisters grow up in a vacuum of sorts without any interaction with the community. Being in “Korean enclaves that remained ignorant of English-speaking America” they missed out on life in every sphere (122). Their father had insisted on raising his daughters in a strictly Korean environment, yet he did not allow them to socialize with any other family. As a result the girls grew up without forming any strong bond with anyone. There was no chance of connecting with the Korean community nor were they sufficiently comfortable with the American way of life. Their parents’ murder amidst the community’s silence places them in uncertainty, without a contact zone.

In *Bone*, the pull between the community and the self is all the more poignant, leading as it does, to the death of a character. The three daughters of Mah find themselves precariously balanced in their desire to live life on their own terms while at the same time needing to maintain the image of the good Chinese daughters. Caught in this dilemma, all three daughters react very differently. Leila, the eldest, finds herself trapped in her life, unable to move on despite knowing that the right thing to do was to move on. Nina, the youngest, moves far away from home, taking a job that ensures constant flying. She cuts herself off from her family, only making contact when she absolutely had to. Ona, the middle daughter, is caught up between the two sisters, just as she is caught up between two parents who do not get along – one of whom is firmly rooted in Salmon Alley and the other going away more often than he is home.

Ona tries to go away too, to escape her claustrophobic life, controlled by parental dictates. She is caught between her loyalty to her parents and her love for her boyfriend Osvaldo. Initially her parents encourage her relationship with Osvaldo but when they fall

out with Osvaldo's parents, they tell Ona to break up with Osvaldo as well. For her parents loyalty, parental guidance, trust are all important and they fail to anticipate the crisis around Ona. As a young woman of twenty she wants to live life on her terms but finds herself torn between her commitment to Chinese values and her desire for an American identity. She jumps from a building looking for closure, but ensures that everyone else is denied it.

It is the community values of filial devotion which Ona internalised so deeply that makes it impossible for her to leave her family behind to attempt a life outside. The same values prevent Nina from coming home because she too is haunted by the fact that she has failed her family in her search for a life outside Chinatown. Leila on the other hand feels guilty by her aspiration for happiness.

In the very first page of the book, we come to know of the conflict between the community and the individual/family. The Chinese community like every other community is seen to be inherently patriarchal in nature with a tendency to undermine daughters:

We were a family of three girls. By Chinese standards, that wasn't lucky. In Chinatown, everyone knew our story. Outsiders jerked their chins, looked at us, shook their heads. We heard things.

“A failed family....Nothing but daughters.” (*Bone 3*)

Daughters are considered unlucky – a symbol of failure. But Leon, a father of three girls, often mocked by people, does not seem to believe in this. Not only does he have two daughters of his own, he had actually chosen to marry a woman with a daughter from an earlier marriage. He values his daughters and does not make them feel that he would have preferred a son to one of them. However, as far as the Chinese community was concerned, they were seen as unlucky. This leaves the father unfazed as he reassures his daughters: “People talking. People jealous.” He waved a hand in the air. “Five sons don't make one good daughter” (3). Leon does his parenting in what he calls a chopsuey style: firm at times, easy at others.

The resistance of the community to what they see as a threat to their old way of life is strong. Although they are willing to send their children to American schools, they exhibit a stubborn resistance to anything that appears to contest the Chinese way of things. The American school system that is more inclusive in its approach expects parents to be

involved in the education process, but this does not go well with the Chinese parents who expect the teacher to have sole responsibility for what the children are up to at schools. Even when it is explained to them by a person of Chinese origin, someone they see as their own, they refuse to accept it. Instead they harp upon their Chinese identity as an explanation for continuing in the old way. As Leila observes:

At the evaluation conferences, I tell them that their participation is important. They tell me, "That's your job. In China, the teacher bears all responsibility." I use my This Isn't China defense. I remind them "We're in America." But some parents take this to heart and raise their voices. "We're Chinese first, always."

(16)

Leila tries to persuade the Chinese settlers to adjust to an American way of life, but fails because of the innate resistance of the Chinese parents who feel that they would be discarding their own culture if they take an active interest in their children's school life and work. Uncertain people desperately try to hold on to what they feel are their traditional values, to the detriment of their children's welfare.

In the first generation thus, the ethnic identity is much stronger than the American identity. The privileges of the United States become suspect when it collide with their Chinese values. It is interesting to see how the community stays the community but how the idea of self shifts from the self within the family to the individual self at different points in time.

The Sleepwalker's Guide to Dancing presents a completely different picture of the conflict between self and the community. Despite the smallness of the community, there is still a pressure to conform to its values. The small community of three families that is prominently placed in the narrative is in its turn influenced and guided by the wider Indian community in New Mexico. Cautionary tales of other people are often recounted in gatherings to indirectly guide the course of the younger people's life choices:

"Did you hear about the Patels' daughter Seema? Seems she's in Houston living with an American boy and owning some topless bar where you can only order small dishes of Spanish food! Mother herself told me!"... the others choked on disbelief ("Seema? The National Merit Finalist?")... (182)

This apparently casual conversation makes it clear to Amina the unacceptability of ever dating an American (as well as opening a topless bar serving Spanish food for that

matter!). Therefore when Amina finally starts dating Jamie Anderson, she is well aware of the challenges facing her. She is further disadvantaged by the fact that Dimple, her best friend and enfant terrible, who after a life time of disappointing her parents, decides to get married to a fellow Suriani guy, thereby making up to her parents for all her past transgressions. What is ironic is that Dimple had always tried to negate her Indianness in her attempts to be an all-American girl – from dating jocks in high school to “quietly moving through Seattle’s supply of eligible men with a carnivorousness that occasionally scared Amina” as a young woman – she had gone out of the way to resist the tag of being a “desi” girl. Her job as a curator in a museum is again a direct challenge to her father who does not even consider it a real job. Yet despite all her rebellious behaviour, she ends up exactly with the kind of life that is the dream of every Indian immigrant parents – from Gogol (*The Namesake*) onwards – of their children marrying another Indian, preferably from the same community.

Perhaps the pull between the community’s expectation and the individual’s desire is best revealed in the character of Kamala whose personal values subscribes to the values of the community, the twist being it is the community back home. Kamala never really adapts to living in America, to her America embodies all that is evil. It is the “brilliant country where the children listen to other children about who to spend their lives with” (162). It is especially hurtful for Kamala that she is blamed by Thomas’s mother for the family continuing to live in the United States when she wants nothing more than to go back to India.

“... After all these years, after everything we have built for ourselves there, after all that I have tried to give you, you want to uproot the kids from their entire lives and just move back here?”... “What can you have here that you can’t at home?” Thomas took a step forward. “Really, tell me! You sit here like some pained mermaid longing for her sea, but what is it, really, that you don’t have back in the States? Your sisters who live in all different towns here anyway? Your independence? Enough help around the house? Someone to—”
“*Myself*,” Kamala said. (44)

All the amenities of the United States could not charm Kamala into falling for the land. She hated negotiating what she considered a half life of inferior choices. Very early into settling here, she realised that she could never be her “own” self in the new land.

To Kamala, the United States always remained a foreign land or one may say, she remained the eternal foreigner. Her inability to accept the norms of the new land made her assimilation into the American scenario impossible. It is as if the tiny diminutive woman braving her first dust storm of New Mexico in a sari blatantly refused to accept that her dress and her values need modification to survive in the harsher new climate. And that remained the tragedy of Kamala's life. Her refusal to adapt to American ways alienated her from her husband:

“The Americans do that! It's their way. You would know if you knew any!”...

“We're not going back, Kamala. You have to at least try to fit in.”...

“*Do* something. Volunteer at a shelter. Get a part-time job.”...

“I REFUSE.” She glared at him. “You think that changing and changing and changing ourselves to fit in with these people is some good thing?” She tilted her chin up, daring him. “Fine then. You do it. Go away and become some idiot who smiles all the time for no reason because I don't care anymore! I really don't.” (118-19)

Kamala could not or did not try to even understand the dynamics of American social and professional relationships. Her insecurity was heightened by her husband's wide popularity in his work life. Her less than perfect English after more than thirty years of residing in the United States is indicative of her limited interaction with people from other communities. Deep inside Kamala is suspicious of the changes that one has to go through to adapt themselves to a new culture, considering it a betrayal of her native culture.

Community affects the individual in their sense of identity, but the pertinent inquiry should question which community is it that has the utmost effect. The analysis of the three texts reveals that even among the members of a single family, different notions of community clamour for precedence. In *The Interpreter*, for instance, if Mr. Park seems to be guided by the ideals of the entrepreneurial American who overcomes all obstacles to realise the American Dream, his elder daughter, Grace, seemed to internalise the cultural value of filial loyalty, sacrificing her love in order to avenge her parents.

The ‘Chutnification’ of Identity

Rushdie's term can be applied to the process of acculturation amongst the immigrants and their children. In the second and third generations, the ethnic cultural values which

they imbibe from their parents fail to have the same significance or impact in their lives. Moslund considers the migrant identity as struggling with the “uncertainty of a liminal position in between two or several cultures” (6). Drawing a fine distinction between a hybrid and hybridity, he says that a hybrid “is”; “is” as opposed to hybridity which is a continuing process. The hybridity of the immigrant American subject arises from this continuous uncertainty regarding the space they occupy in the tapestry that makes up the American people. No matter the extent of the influence of a contradictory set of cultural norms, the American subject very much goes on to assert their own identity.

In *The Interpreter*, Suzy Park is a twenty-nine year old interpreter for an agency that entails her interpreting at depositions. A child of first generation Korean parents who did not speak much English, for her “interpreting is almost a habit” (16). She is trapped into a life of isolation, having been cut off by her family for having an affair with a married Caucasian man, a relationship that did not work out. Her parents are shot dead by unknown assailants. Her elder sister refuses to speak to her. *The Interpreter* focuses on the predicament of growing up as Korean-American. The central character is in search of answers that will help her make sense of her family’s lives. The themes of alienation, of dysfunctional family life, of struggles for survival are present but the book also makes an attempt to break the stereotypical image of the new Korean-American as the model minority figure. The many Koreans whom we meet in this narrative are a far cry from being the success story that Korean-Americans have been celebrated as. They are mostly unskilled labours, without any safety net, their “immigrant life follows different rules—no taxes, no benefits, sometimes not even Social Security or green cards”. (15)

Suzy Park, despite her advantage of education and affluent background, fails to live up to her full potential. She is haunted by her inexplicable family history. More than the strumming anger that often leads to violence in the house, she is affected most by the activities of her elder sister, Grace. Grace is smart, beautiful and popular; however, she refuses to confide in her sister building a wall of silence around herself. Grace is traumatised by acting as the interpreter between her father and the INS; she is unable to deal with the guilt of betraying her fellow countrymen. Out of tremendous love for her sister, she refuses to allow her parents to exploit her sister in the same way. The downside of this is Suzy grows up without a sense of guilt but also intuitively understanding that there’s something about her family that is hidden from her. Grace

moves to the furthest possible college from home for her higher education and opts for a career as a teacher of ESL, something she knows her father would have highly disapproved of.

The identity of Grace is defined by the three way conflict within her – that of her family values that demand total loyalty from one’s children, that of her sense of identity as a Korean betraying her poorer coethnics and that of her desire of being a free individual. It is these three aspects that tear her apart, pulling her into sudden actions that betray her truer instincts. From being a co-informer of her parents, she goes on to become a conscientious teacher living a staid life. Even the death of her parents fails to disturb her equanimity. Yet what she cannot come to terms with is all the men she inadvertently wronged under her parents’ influence. She personally goes to apologise to these people trying to right the wrongs. Her grief is palpable to all:

“When my sister came to you ... how much did she know about our parents?”

He contemplates her for a while before saying, “Your sister—I’d never seen a young woman so haunted by grief.” Then he asks quietly, “Who do you think interpreted for your parents all those times with the INS?” (245)

When Suzy goes on the trail of her parents’ murderers, she ends up learning the bitter truth about her parents. She also learns that the very people who still refuse to forgive the Parks, have sympathy for Grace because they could empathise with her grief. Yet this same Grace was forced to commit the ultimate act of betrayal reminiscent of her parents when she planned to kill off her parents’ murderer, despite knowing that he did what he did because he was in love with her and wanted to hurt the people who had put her through so much:

DJ was supposed to have been deported in November 1995, right around the time of her parents’ shooting. Perfect timing, being sent back to Korea right after the crime. But, then, how is it possible that an ex-gang member who’d been deported reappears five years later, flaunting his BMW, picking up Grace after school? Why would Grace disappear with him?

... It’s got KK fingerprints all over it. The way they do away with their enemies. The exactness of the shooting.

But the gang claimed that they were set up. They said that her parents were already dead when they arrived at the scene. According to Kim Yong Su, the grocers had never ordered KK to kill. If neither the ones who hired the gang nor

the gang themselves had murder on their minds, is it possible that the murder might have been committed by someone else, with an entirely different motive? Someone intimate with the gang, who knew about their mission on that morning in 1995, who was not afraid to frame them? Yet who would have been clever enough to come up with such a plan?

The brave one. Someone so righteous that eliminating them would've been a necessity. (277-78)

These lines reveal the complicity of all the people involved in the incident. All the people had an agenda of their own for doing what they did. At the end of the day, the Parks were dead, and the murderer was taken care of by a people who considered the murder “righteous”. The only ones denied justice, or even closure, were the two Park daughters. And when Johnny a.k.a. DJ comes back five years later, it is to Grace that he goes. In his view, he had freed Grace. But it is at that moment of truth that Grace truly finds herself. She sets about a course of action to avenge the death of her parents – at the cost of giving up on the one person who had consistently abided by her:

Grace must have suspected him all along. She must have known that he would do anything to save her. She must have prayed never to find out. Except DJ must have crawled back somehow ... She would never have let him get away with it. She would never have forgiven him. Since when does a good Korean girl marry the one who's shot her parents, even if it had all been for her? Love? Bury him in the same water, that would be Grace's revenge. Never messy. No evidence. Not a chance of suspicion. She would've fooled them all. Fuck KK boys. Fuck grocers who hated her parents. Fuck INS. Fuck the Bronx DA. And most of all, fuck Detective Lester. (293)

Because no matter how many curfews she exceeded, how many rules she broke, Grace is after all “a good Korean girl” – trapped in a destiny she could not change nor escape. The choice to eliminate Johnny is not really a choice in as much it is the fate to which Grace had been doomed by her grief and guilt – guilt regarding what her parents had to face because of her and guilt about what the community had to face because of her parents.

Likewise, Suzy finds herself at the very moment she divines Grace's plan. And she too like her sister, contrary to what the text or she herself might have predicted, does something very unexpected:

Detective Lester, this is Suzy Park. I know who killed my parents. I know it was the Korean grocers; a group of them had sent the gang that morning. I've got their names. Start with Kim Yong Su, and he'll tell you the rest. (294)

She ends up denouncing the very same grocers for whom she had expressed so much sympathy throughout the narrative. Despite her family cutting her off from their lives, despite her suffering so much because of them both at home and at life after home, when the time comes to take a call on it, she unhesitatingly sides with her estranged family. Like her father, she does not think twice before informing on these men, desperate men who were victims of her father's cruel undertakings.

Suzy and Grace finally seem to find their self – a self developed from negotiating with traditional values and American practicality. The passivity of Suzy and the directionless passion of Grace seem to mature into determined strength of character as the sisters find new resolution for their lives.

In *Bone*, the three daughters find it almost impossible to move out of Chinatown. Without it ever being said in so many words, Leila's recounting of Chinatown implies that she is almost imprisoned in it. The worse aspect of the imprisonment is that she could not admit it to herself out of a sense of loyalty to her mother. The youngest daughter, Nina, escapes to New York. Ona, the middle daughter is caught between Chinese and American values and finally commits suicide to end her dilemma. For the three sisters, their Chineseness as much their location inside Chinatown is irretrievably connected to their identity.

Leila's inability to move beyond the community is further caused by her job at a school. Much like Suzy Park in *The Interpreter*, Leila acts as the interpreter between the Chinese parents of the school kids and the school authority. One gets the sense that it is a job she considers righteous and giving – alleviating the troubles of the parents, easing them into the role expected of them as parents of the children of the United States. She is the person who goes to the parents when they are to be informed anything regarding their kids. Her insider position as a Chinese American makes her aware of the many difficulties faced by a recent immigrant and raises in her a sense of uncomfortable guilt. The job roots her to the place, uncomfortable and hard though it is, she is unable to leave it as she finds her life's purpose in helping out these people:

My job is about being the bridge between the classroom teacher and the parents.

Teachers target the kids, and I make home visits; sometimes a student needs special tutoring, sometimes it's a disciplinary problem I have to discuss with the parents. My job is about getting the parents involved, opening up a line of communication. I speak enough Chinese and I'm pretty good with parents, but it still surprises me how familiar some of the frustration still feels. The job sounds great on paper, but sometimes, when I'm face to face with the parent, I get this creepy feeling that I'm doing a bit of a missionary number. (16)

Leila goes on to explain the circumstances. The parents who are desperately trying to earn their living in America work long hours and do not have the time or the energy to devote interest in their children's education:

Most of my students are recent immigrants. Both parents work. Swing shift. Graveyard. Seamstress. Dishwasher. Janitor. Waiter. One job bleeds into another. They have enough worries, and they don't like me coming in and telling them they have one more. (16)

It is their changed circumstances rather than their loyalty to their culture that makes them fall back upon the so called values fostered by the culture of their erstwhile homeland. Their predicament draws Leila's sympathy though she fails to understand the reason for their refusal to mentally adjust to their new land and its culture.

When Leila goes to visit the homes of her students, she is depressed because those places remind her of her past – a past that she had barely escaped. The cramped living quarters, the unaware display of obvious poverty, their inability to negotiate the new realities of their everyday life reminds Leila of the unchanged nature of the immigrant existence. She is distressed by the barrenness of lives and even more appalled by the fact that the parents seemed to be more in need of help than the children:

Being inside their cramped apartments depresses me. I'm reminded that we've lived like that, too. ... Cardboard boxes everywhere, rearranged and used as stools or tables or homework desks. The money talk at dinnertime, the list of things they don't know or can't figure out. Cluttered rooms. Bare lives. Every day I'm reminded nothing's changed about making a life or raising kids. Everything is hard. (17)

If Leila is depressed by this reminder of their past, she is also forced to empathize with the dilemma of the parents, working in a strange land which is culturally alien to them. They want to earn money by working hard, not allowing for any spiritual or emotional

connection with their new land and circumstances. That is why Leila wants to do something for these people:

What's hard for me is realizing that the parents seem more in need than the kids. They try too hard, and it's all wrong; they overdo the politeness and their out-of-context compliments grate on my nerves. "You're so Chinese. You're so smart. You should run for Miss Chinatown." (17)

More than the squalor, the mean poverty, it is the "wrong" way that such people try to handle life in the United States that strikes Leila. Acting as Mah's guide since her childhood, Leila understands the difficulty of navigating a world as the first English speaking generation.

Leila shares a complicated relationship with the Chinatown community. She is comfortable with her identity as someone coming from Chinatown but at the same time she does not like identifying herself as a Chinese alone. She does not feel comfortable with the narrowness of Chinatown nor does she particularly like or understand the odd rituals followed by the community. Yet, she realises at a deeper level that she shares something unique with the people in Chinatown, something that no outsider could perceive:

Looking out, I thought, So this is what Chinatown looks like from inside those dark Greyhound buses; this slow view, these strange color combinations, these narrow streets, this is what tourists come to see. I felt a small lightening up inside, because I knew, no matter what people saw, no matter how close they looked, our inside story is something entirely different. (145)

A sense of empathy with what she sees enables Leila to understand and identify with the world of Chinatown. However strange it may appear to the viewer the first time around, there is something which touches the minds and hearts of people sharing a common culture. However, it may be noted that as elsewhere – in Walt Whitman for instance – identification is not identity (Whitman, "Song of Myself"). They are merely points of contact for a second-generation American exposed to two cultures at the same time.

There seems to be an understanding that the further the generation removed from the first generation, the more they would lose traces of their "own" culture. But first generation immigrants do not seem to understand this phenomenon and from this arises all the gaps in understanding between parents and children. But this unapologetic clutching on to

their “native” ways is not exclusive of parents alone; there are other traditionalists too who find the complete identification with an English only “American” identity disturbing. Mason, Leila’s lover, for instance, could not tolerate his cousin, Dale, because Dale speaks only English, brought up as he was outside Chinatown. What becomes clear from this exchange is that intimate set-ups of ethnic communities like Chinatowns helps in fostering a more conservative outlook even among its younger members as well as helping them to stay in touch with the more traditional Chinese values.

Conversely, this also elucidates what is symbolised by one’s conscious decision to move away from such a locale:

Mason ... said he couldn’t stand talking any longer to Dale. “The guy sounds so white.”

It wasn’t Dale’s fault, but I didn’t say anything. Dale grew up on the peninsula and went to an all-white school, so how else was he supposed to talk? I’ve met a lot of kids like him: fourth-, fifth-, even sixth-generation kids who had no Chinese. To me, they just sounded like English was their only language, nothing wrong with that. (43)

For kids like Dale, raised as they are away from Chinatown, there are more opportunities to become “white” American. Being white is a privilege, and Mason seems to imply that growing up outside Chinatown is a privilege. Although he proclaims to find such characteristics odious, nevertheless the narrative makes it clear that given half a chance he would also prefer to have those opportunities.

If Leila’s attitude to Chinese cultural values is somewhat ambivalent, Mason’s attitude to Chinatown is characteristic of the vast majority of young people trapped inside a similar community. He is someone who is equally comfortable inside as well as outside Chinatown. Unlike Leila, he is not disturbed by the closed narrowness of Chinatown. He knows and respects the Chinese ways, yet he is also careful to distance himself from actions that are stereotypically Chinese. He prefers to enjoy the simple opportunities available outside Chinatown, but chooses not to indulge in activities that might be explained away as racially coloured. Leila has this to say about him:

Mason is a little strange about having been born and raised in Chinatown; sometimes he’s proud and sometimes he’s not. Most of my other boyfriends

didn't feel comfortable outside of Chinatown; they didn't even much like doing things outside the family. Mason likes to ski and he goes to Tahoe as much as he can. He doesn't care if he's the only Chinese guy on the expert runs; he knows he's good enough. What surprises me is that he never gambles. "It's too Chinesey," he says. There's that about him, though; sometimes he says things in that half-embarrassed tone. (183)

This marks an ambivalence that reveals his actual discomfort regarding his identity. That he would go to avoid something that he might otherwise find enjoyable just so that he is not considered a member of his community reveals his ambivalence regarding his place in the community.

Leila is looking for an identity as an American – an identity that is not racial, or maybe even political – an identity that is more inclusive, or hybrid without any declamation. She mocks Chinese origin people who act white, and snubs people who call her Chinese. To her, being American is the way to freedom. But too often being American is in conflict with being Chinese—because being Chinese is not merely about political beliefs but about living life with certain values – values that are often at odds with the liberal, individualistic ideals that make up the American mindset.

In *The Sleepwalker's Guide to Dancing*, this self-fashioning of the immigrant subject in the light of the pull between the norms of the community and the private desire of the individual results in insecurity. Kamala attempts to reconcile to her American identity by trying to join the only institution similar to what she knew back home in India – the church. She is a devout Christian who keeps trying out various churches, much as she follows the different preachers on radio. Her constant search for Jesus reveals her sense of missing something significant in her life:

It should have been comforting enough that her mother had finally left the Trinity Baptist Church a good three years earlier, shunning their attempts to bring her back into the fold with a haughty disdain that confounded them. It should have been comforting to know that Mort Hinley was just another in a long line of preachers Kamala would love for a day, a week, a series of months, until she had decided (as she had with the Trinity Baptist Church, Oral Roberts, Benny Hinn, and a series of others) that he was getting between her and Jesus.

(170)

Yet the feel of God eludes her in all these churches perhaps because what she is searching for is a feel of home. Despite Kamala's addiction to different churches at different points of time, she does not seem to socialise with other church goers outside church. Her social interaction is limited to the Kurians and the Balakrishnans, people who do not share her faith but her native land. Though Kamala seems to be quite taken with Jesus and his presentation by the different churches, she does not seem all that comfortable in dealing with the followers of these churches. Essentially Kamala is a lonely woman, growing apart from her husband with each year of living in the United States.

Kamala maintains a deliberate distance from any American influence, taking pride in the fact that she always served her husband Indian food. A masterful cook otherwise, when cooking American food, she churns out horrors, her pot roast holding "its shape through vigorous chewing, while attempts to swallow the mashed potatoes left their tongues sealed to the roofs of their mouths" (127). A petite, beautiful, dignified woman, she becomes a caricature of herself when she tries to dress up American:

Amina and Akhil stared, speechless. It wasn't just the plasticky-looking jumpsuit, or the hair she had obviously untwisted from a braid to remold into a high ponytail, or even the tennis shoes Kamala wore on her feet, clean and white and laced in place like intergalactic marshmallows. It was her smile. Somehow in the last eight hours, their mother had become *chipper*. Her eyes and lips glistened with pinks and purples as she leaned against the kitchen counter.

Akhil scowled. "What's on your face?"

"I went to the makeup counter at Dillard's." ...

"What are those?" Amina asked. "Parachuting pants!" Kamala looked down at her own legs like they belonged to an actual skydiver. "They're the latest things." (121-22)

It is not really clear as to whether such experiments of Kamala are genuine accidents or deliberate parodies. The character is melodramatic enough to warrant any of these possibilities. But the one thing that stands clear is that Kamala never fits into nor desires to fit into the American way of affairs. It is only when Thomas gets sick that finally the husband and the wife come together as a team. In caring for Thomas, fighting with the

family for his right to forego treatment for his tumour, Kamala finally finds a purpose in life.

For every Kamala, there is a Sanji – a first generation immigrant who tries to turn the United States into a home – forging new ties beyond coethnicity or consanguinity. Despite her adherence to Indian attire, Sanji at heart has adopted the liberal American values of easy interaction – one reason why all the children find it easier to confide in her than their own parents. But Sanji is also very Indian when it comes to selflessly caring for someone. In Sanji is seen the best of both worlds. She happens to be the most balanced person in the text, sure of herself with the right word for every occasion.

Guilt is also a defining characteristic of the second generation Amina, but unlike Suzy and Leila, her guilt is personal. She cannot reconcile with the death of her sibling, Akhil, in an accident. Akhil was a bitter, brilliant boy whose reaction to the United States was pretty much in line with Kamala's, till the United States came to be embodied in the person of his white classmate, Paige Anderson. In Paige he found an America that he could love, and that loved him back.

Amina suffers from a different guilt too and this guilt threatened to derail her very existence. She had taken the only picture of Bobby McCloud, the Puyallup tribe leader, as he hurtled to his death jumping from the Aurora bridge in Seattle. Amina had escaped to Seattle to put physical distance from her family and her memories of Akhil, but with the Bobby McCloud incident, Seattle too became poisoned for her. The photograph became a national sensation with Amina being accused of insensitivity and voyeurism. The money that kept on coming for the photograph did not do her mental condition any good. To escape the seriousness of her life, she finally takes up wedding photography. But there too, she is addicted to the ugly, the “occasional, accidental, the everyday tragedy” (381). When years later she reconciles with Jamie Anderson, the brother of Paige, Amina finally finds a modicum of hope. But faith and peace still take a lot of time to enter her life. Amina seemed to be running her entire life, persistently dogged by tragedy at every step. It is only when she accepts that it is okay to express her darker moments that she finally finds peace with herself. She comes clean to her parents about dating a white guy, and professionally, she agrees to exhibit her dark photographs that she had kept secret from everyone.

To her disappointment, Dimple finds her interests aligned with her parents' lifelong aspirations for her when she falls in love with Sajeiv. Dimple who had been a rebel all her life, notorious for her high school escapades, making it necessary for her parents to bundle her off to reform school, for that very Dimple to fall for someone her mother would approve of was a bitter pill to swallow. In a last ditch attempt to keep her family out of it, Dimple decides to go for a civil wedding in Seattle. But here too, she is outvoted by none other than Thomas. Thomas's suggestion to have the wedding at his backyard might spring from his understanding of how strongly the Kurians desired to participate in their daughter's wedding. Being close to Dimple, he realises how much she is repelled by the idea of a traditional wedding. He is aware though that Dimple would find it very difficult to say no to him. So Thomas's suggestion is also an act of love for his adopted family, much like Dimple's acceptance of his suggestion. And it is amidst her adopted extended family, accepting her place among them, that Dimple finally finds happiness. The identity, lives and decisions of the characters in this particular text is complicated by their concept of home – to Dimple, Seattle is home; to Sanji, Albuquerque is home; and to Kamala, Salem (India) will forever be home.

The fragmentation that the characters experience is as much a result of their feeling of rootlessness as it is of the internalised clash between the community values and one's personal aspirations. The thinking subject emerges out of a conflict of values between the community and one's personal desires, and the novels reveal that often this "emergence" of the individual is cut short/snuffed out by the very values that the community forces on the individual. As the self is shaped by one's perception of the other, the individual identity too is shaped by the community identity. The community thus acts as a repository of values for the immigrant community despite the very different groups of people that come to represent "community" in these texts. The characters of Suki Kim, Fae Myenne Ng and Mira Jacobs finally evolve into people almost despite themselves, and if it may be said, almost despite their authors.

For an immigrant, the community not only acts as a repository of traditional values, it also acts as the rallying point. It helps to propagate the values and beliefs of the old world, particularly to the successive generations of immigrants as seen in *Bone* through various ethnic institutions like Chinese schools or community clubs. The community also becomes a huge support system in a foreign land, protecting its own members from the

outside world as well as creating a network of mutual dependence among its members. It offers moral and financial support during bad times. It also helps to provide employment to fellow members who otherwise might go jobless because of lack of language skills. When an individual cuts herself off from the community, she becomes unmoored. It is as if the individual looking for a different or wider American identity has to go against the will of the community. Thus, members pulling out like Nina in *Bone* and Suzy in *The Interpreter* are left to look beyond it to form other groups, other friends.

The idea of community is different to different people and hence people's reaction to it varies. Despite the benefits of being a member of a community, some individuals exploit the community resources to further their own interests as Mr. Park did when he reported illegal immigrants to the INS. When that happens, it is the individual who pays the price. Others feel the pressure to conform to the norms of the community. It is in the struggle of the individual against such pressure that the immigrant identity is formed. The uncertainty that the characters experience is a reflection of their being pulled between the community values and their private aspirations as Americans.

As more assimilated individuals, contemporary immigrants struggle with their identity as Americans who belong to ethnic minorities. They are comfortable with their ethnic identities but have an aversion to being reduced to just that. For most immigrants today, one's identity at a specific point of time is derived from what is upmost in one's regard at the time – the community identity or the rebel self.

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