

CHAPTER TWO

NEGOTIATING DISPLACEMENT, CHALLENGING BOUNDARIES

Leaving a homeland, it cuts into you like nothing else. It's like an illness, haunting generations. But I wonder if we hadn't also hoped that America might make us forget, that in this new country a tradition wouldn't shun you because you're a middle-aged couple with no children.

(Suki Kim, *The Interpreter* 150)

Yet American culture, as Suzy was shocked to discover upon leaving home, was also foreign to her. Thanksgiving dinners. Eggnogs. The Mary Tyler Moore Show. Monopoly. Dr. Seuss. JFK. Such loaded American symbols meant nothing to her. They brought back no dear memory, no pull of nostalgia....Being bilingual, being multicultural should have brought two worlds into one heart, and yet for Suzy, it meant a persistent hollowness. It seems that she needed to love one culture to be able to love the other. Piling up cultural references led to no further identification....She was stuck in a vacuum where neither culture moved nor owned her. Deep inside, she felt no connection....

(Suki Kim, *The Interpreter* 166)

We think that the relationship between the tropes of diaspora and transnational social practice can be understood best as two related but often contradictory aspects or subsets of displacement. Talking about diaspora or transnationalism without placing them in the broader context of displacement is to diminish the weight of exile, the notion of home, or conversely the act of recreating the new home place and thence the construction of new identities and community within the nation-state in which the group has resettled.

(Anderson and Lee, *Displacements and Diasporas: Asians in the Americas* 10)

The aim of this chapter is to study the experience of displacement in contemporary Asian American migration fiction. It addresses the problems of physical, social, cultural and emotional displacement and adjustment faced by the migrant/diasporic communities, along with their attempts at 'belonging' through an analysis of such fiction. Migration

indicates separation from one's homeland and estrangement, often enforced, from one's culture. Whether it is voluntary or forced migration, displacement, both physical and cultural, remains an essential factor. The selected texts for this study of the consequences of dislocation amongst the migrant settlers are Thrity Umrigar's *If Today be Sweet*, Shaila Abdullah's *Saffron Dreams*, Chang-Rae Lee's *Native Speaker*, and Gish Jen's *World and Town*. The texts deal with problems of memory and nostalgia on the settlers' part as they struggle with disavowal amidst rejection in America, and interrogate at the same time, the tendency to construct unidimensional 'departures' and 'arrivals'.

Anderson and Lee observe that "displacement shares with diaspora the notions of physical dislocation, banishment, and exile, but emphatically draws attention to the cultural dimension; that is, how one's ancestral culture or the culture of the birthplace has been dislocated, transformed, rejected, or replaced by a new one, one of 'cross-connections, not root' (Bammer, xv qtd. in *Displacements and Diasporas* 11). Apart from physical and cultural dislocation, there may be instances of people who "are not physically dislocated and displaced but who have been culturally displaced through the political construction of national borders across their land, their incorporation into national political economies, and the imposition of new cultural elements" (11). Such a situation existed in Africa during colonial rule when a foreign language was imposed on the people.

In the context of migration, displacement assumes four forms: "as the lived experienced of the immigrant, the refugee, the exile, the expatriate, and the migrant: physical/spatial displacement, cultural displacement, psychological/affective displacement, and intellectual displacement" (11). Further, "A displaced group can experience one form or several forms, and one displaced person in a group can live a displaced life differently from others, depending on the relative degree of his or her estrangement" (11). Each group may experience displacement depending on the time or place or the political set up. It involves creation of a new home place, followed by a sense of nostalgia leading to recreation of the old cultural frameworks in new forms. Displacement is summed up by Anderson and Lee in the following manner:

Such a conceptualization of displacement is therefore linked to the construction of new identities and new cultural or ethnic communities within the new nation-state in which the group has resettled. In other words, in the creation of the new

identity or a new community, what do displaced members maintain, reject, replace, or reinvent to create a new whole? (12)

Displacement stretches from physical and cultural dislocation to attempts to settle down in a new home land with new cultural values to the invention of new identities which would be a mixture of both the old and the new.

These experiences have been different based on the different communities as well as the different time periods of arrival. As pointed out by Anderson and Lee, the reasons for the migration of Asians to America are numerous:

Many have fled threats to their lives from war and revolution, others have been displaced by economic and social upheaval, and still others have been recruited to meet the demands of new labor markets or seek opportunities to invest their human or financial capital....Albeit inadvertently, the Immigration Reform Act of 1965 reversed eighty years of heavy restrictions of Asian immigration to the United States. The act favored scientific and medical personnel and entrepreneurs, as well as giving preference to family members of those already in the United States....(5)

While a majority of immigrants came in search of better job opportunities, some were forced to look for options outside their homelands to survive political conflict as well as economic crises. Certain “technical, medical, and managerial personnel” were accepted as immigrants in America (Anderson and Lee 6) after a period of restrictions against Asian immigrants. The exclusionary ideologies and legislation ensured that the process “was fraught with displacement and ruptures in cultural continuity” as Anderson and Lee observe (43). America welcomed different kinds of people with varying work potential to meet different kinds of market and social needs at different times.

However, the later decades of the twentieth century produced another wave of migrants from Asia with “considerably less education, less money, and less cosmopolitan backgrounds” than the seventies and eighties (6). According to Anderson and Lee,

In the last two decades, the majority of Asian immigrants have again been working-class migrants. The restructuring of capitalism has left a jetsam of displaced and dislocated peoples, including millions drawn into a global labor market in the wake of neoliberal economic policies in China, India, and Southeast Asia. Women now make up the majority of these working-class

immigrants. Hundreds of thousands of displaced Asian workers have been drawn into the U.S. economy as servers, cleaners, sex workers, low-wage assembly workers, data processors, and software engineers.... Asian immigrants arrive daily in the United States by the hundreds as smuggled labor, deeply indebted to transnational criminal gangs and completely unprotected from the worst sorts of exploitation. (6-7)

This information shows that the nature of migration or the class of migrants is determined from time to time by the requirements of the American situation. If at one time there were openings for skilled and trained middle class personnel, they were followed by the need for cheap labour in the domestic and other sectors. Refugees and other desperate people seeking shelter in the United States were willing to accept any kind of lowly job that guaranteed them a regular income.

Often as pointed out by Grewal in *Transnational America*, “Transnational movements of people were made possible by earlier migrants who became cultural and...economic mediators, paying the visa and travel fees to import workers, but often also exploiting the workers as well” (6). She informs that the professional networks which facilitated migration are “not simply professional. Rather...culture, gender, class, nationality, race, and other factors also enabled the formation and maintenance of these networks” (6). As more and more people made their way to the United States, trained personnel found better footholds in America than others. Each wave of migration left its mark on the American landscape and society:

The changes to the social landscape are felt as far north as the Arctic Circle, where in Kotzebue, northwest Alaska, the business community, including the proprietors of the Pizza Hut, the beauty parlor, and video rental shop, are Korean immigrants; in the last two years, the more entrepreneurial of the two taxi companies in that city is run by three Thai men. (6)

Immigrants to America found their way to various corners of the USA and took up whatever business or work opportunities that were available to them. With so many ethnicities making their presence felt in America, it becomes difficult to decide what or who is American.

In this context Grewal observes that:

Americanness as a concept shifted by location and place and historical context, as well as factors such as race, gender, class, nationality, and religion, producing different kinds of subjects. This shifting and changing national subject could be, as with immigrants, transnational, moving across nations and national boundaries to produce American identities imbricated within a consumer citizenship that exceeded the bounds of the nation to become transnational. While the American dream has been an essential aspect of consumer culture in twentieth-century America, producing the “American way of life” as a primary component of nationalism formed through a conceptualization of liberal democracy, it came to signify a variety of affiliative practices of belonging on the part of many migrants within the United States by the end of the century. (8)

It shows that where necessary, for commercial reasons, the migrant population was accepted as American with similar demands for consumer products. The operative phrase here is “affiliative practices of belonging,” indicating a kind of acceptance as part of the American social fabric under an aggressive consumer culture.

Grewal further contends that,

These affiliative practices enabled the formation of subjects of displacement and of national belonging by enabling them to become provisionally attached to new identities and nation-states and thus to cross nation-state borders. Thus the power of American nationalism was visible in its ability to produce provisional national subjects out of immigrants and refugees. (8)

It follows that irrespective of how the immigrants (whether first generation or second generation) regarded themselves, the economic system in America absorbed them to the extent of allowing them provisional identities which enabled them to have a sense of location and to cross nation-state borders. If the State had issues over naturalisation and legitimacy, the market did not.

Given the diversity of the immigrants from Asia in America, Anderson and Lee observe: “The narratives of Asians in the Americas form an extraordinarily rich, complex, and contradictory tapestry of human experience. As the conflicting testimonies... suggest, there are different realities among widely diverse Asian populations” (*Displacements and Diasporas* 7). Consequently, migration literature has evolved to portray the changing

immigrant condition as well as the new challenges that have come to define them. It is in facing the challenges of living in a foreign land that the immigrant identity is shaped as a people and as individuals. The chosen texts present the experiences of the Indian American, Pakistani American, Korean American, and Chinese American communities in different locations across the United States of America.

The hypotheses taken up in this chapter are:

- i) that there is a covert contour of resistance in immigrants against the mainstream values;
- ii) that there is a cultural gap between first generation immigrant parents and their better acculturated children;
- iii) that immigrants have to negotiate between their own cultural ties and those parameters decided for them by American society.

Review of Literature:

Critical writing on displacement as a consequence of migration in literature is polarised around few major areas.

(a) Displacement turning immigrants into “pets” or model minorities:

There is a recurrent idea of the Asian American people as model minority in the United States cultural discourse. Various Asian American ethnic groups have been celebrated for their success stories. Their quiet efficiency and hard work, their reliability and submissiveness have been praised time and again. In his essay, “Petting Asian America”, James Kim argues that this attitude is nothing but a remnant of the colonial device of subject formation that has now become a “neocolonial affective contract” (137). This move is calculated to assuage racial anger over the many acts of discrimination one encounters in daily living. It also helps to make integration more attractive to a minority people. Specifically talking about Chinese Americans, Kim writes:

Like the animals they replaced, these new human pets quickly found themselves in a liminal position: housed at the very limits of the human, at once a model minority and a yellow peril, perpetual foreigners and honorary whites. What threatens to undo this strange emotional servitude and free us from this odious chore of making global capitalism feel better about itself is our anger. (151)

Vijay Prashad (*The Karma of Brown Folk*) does the same when he questions the model minority status of Indian Americans in the contemporary United States. Locating the success and pliancy of Indian Americans in the context of the struggle for Black liberation, he exposes the deliberate construction of the myth of the model minority.

(b) Displacement leading to loss of status in law:

Displacement is often seen to cause a loss of legal status for immigrants. More dangerously, displacement even when legal often leads to a grey existence for immigrants in terms of law. Increasingly migration literature is focussing on the legal aspects of the immigrant condition. No wonder then that critical writing too has evolved to address these issues. In his essay, “From Post-colonial to Post-9/11: A Study of the Contemporary Pakistani-American Fiction,” Muhammad Azeem extends Giorgio Agamben’s state of exception, to talk of the condition of the Pakistani American immigrants in the post 9/11 United States. Azeem argues that the Pakistani immigrant in the United States post 9/11 finds him/herself in “a space where law and lawlessness coexist,... indistinguishable from each other” (75).

(c) Displacement and resistance:

If on the one hand there are critics like Sau-Ling Cynthia Wong who highlight the experience of racial oppression that Asian Americans experience in the United States, countering that there are critics who believe that “in theorizing resistance we must theorize an equally totalizing political subject that challenges racial and sexual oppression and class exploitation at their material and instrumental roots” (Libretti 21). There is a huge opposition between the two groups – one of which is in favour of multiple positionalities of the different Asian American groups while the other argues that such a stance threatens the very idea of the Asian American, stripping it of any meaning. But where the two groups concur is in the fact that it is important to give voice to the voiceless. Contemporary migration literature is increasingly seen to express resistance to the United States’ culture of othering and discrimination.

(d) Displacement eventually leading to revocable assimilation:

Robert Putnam is of the view that in an increasingly globalised world characterised by mobility, the United States has a huge advantage over the other countries in handling the issues of immigration for the simple reason that it has done it before and thrived (2006). He imagines the postethnic world as one that encourages “permeable, syncretic,

'hyphenated' identities... that enable previously separate ethnic groups to see themselves, in part, as members of a shared group with a shared identity" (qtd. in Hollinger 2011). Hollinger talks about the idea of "revocable consent" by which an individual can decide to what extent she chooses to retain her ethnic identity.

Ideally the course of displacement runs from an initial sense of helplessness at the unfamiliar to a state of revocable affiliation when one realises a new web of significance. This journey abounds with a sense of loss and acute nostalgia, a "sense of being rootless, of living between worlds, between a lost past and a non-integrated present" as Chambers observes (*Migrancy, Culture, Identity* 27). Once displaced, a people must learn to adjust to their new surroundings. These adjustments are often painful and humiliating, calling for greater endurance. The consequence of the loss of the familiar is far reaching, impacting future generations of immigrants. One needs to replace the loss with something, and the search for this elusive "something" is what defines the migration experience. Displacement results in a feeling of alienation from the immediate present. The present in its newness, in its unfamiliarity appears unreal. This alienation from the immediate circumstances is also very much a result of more concrete difficulties like having to use a different language, searching for moorings in the sense of financial solvency and a safe place of residence, discovering that one is part of a community that is not welcome in the new country, to cite some instances.

Umrigar's *If Today be Sweet* narrates the experience of Tehmina as she tries to make up her mind about whether to relocate to the United States in her old age to be near her son or live out the rest of her days in her familiar Bombay (Mumbai) after the death of her husband. For the time being, she has moved to the States and is living with her son's family. The text reveals the workings of Tehmina's mind as she tries to make her momentous decision. The plot is unique in the sense that few migration novels have given voice to the plight of the elderly immigrant. In Abdullah's *Saffron Dreams*, the protagonist, Arissa Illahi, experiences the travails of displacement anew when she loses her husband, Faizan, on the 9/11 attack. So far cocooned in her hijab, Arissa, the homemaker, is barely prepared to face the world on her own. Her situation is further complicated by her pregnancy at a time when anti-Muslim sentiment was high in the United States as an aftermath of 9/11. *Saffron Dreams* is the story of how Arissa renegotiates her terms of existence as a female Muslim member of the American society. In Chang-Rae Lee's *Native Speaker*, the second generation protagonist Henry Park is

seen trying to negotiate his assimilation into the United States when he comes across John Kwang, whom he sees as successfully becoming “part of the vernacular” (149). As Henry gets more and more involved with Kwang though, his understanding of Kwang as well as of his own self begins to change. In Gish Jen’s *World and Town*, two parallel immigrant stories converge in a placid New England town. On the one hand is Hattie, a Chinese American, who after having spent a lifetime in the United States still finds herself pondering over her belongingness to the place. On the other hand is the Cambodian family of Chhung who has recently moved to Hattie’s town chased out by troubles in a big city. It is how displacement affects these two units that forms the crux of the narrative. The trajectory of the displacement experience as recorded in the four texts is further explored below.

Towards a new beginning

The arrival at a new place often evokes a sense of dissonance with the surroundings. Apart from the unfamiliarity of the landscape itself, there is a feeling of being on the margins that marks the immigrant experience. This sense of culture shock or disorientation in the new place endures amongst the different members of a family or even a community as they look for moorings against different levels of social and official constraint. This chapter argues that it is this feeling of uncertainty that prevents people from really getting closer to others in the adopted land.

The first sensation of displacement is the sense of loss of the familiar. This sense of loss continues to haunt immigrants and is the reason behind their confusion while settling down in the new place. It drives home the finality of the step taken to migrate. What is no longer there belongs to another life in another land.

The entire text of *If Today be Sweet* is an extended premeditation on what the loss of home can imply. Tehmina is a willing guest in the United States, taking her time to figure out if she wants to make America her new home. She has not yet “lost” her house. There are times when she gets fluttered about her idea of home as the lines below indicate but it is not a permanent sense of loss that she experiences.

Home, she thought, and the solitary word singed like a fire. I need to be home.

But where home was, she was no longer sure. (120)

Her loss is not yet a real loss in the sense that she has not yet lost her home in India. But even as a guest, the unfamiliar overwhelms her time and again. It is not just the reversal

of small daily practices like driving on the right side of the road as opposed to the left in India that jars her, it is the inverted sense of values that Tehmina finds the most difficult to comprehend. Where in India, shameful family secrets are endured in silence, in the United States they become a spectacle that is milked for what it is worth. If in India, going to someone's rescue is not even a question to ponder about, in the United States, notions of decency demand that one ignore the troubles of others unless explicitly asked for help. Faced with such inverted values, it is natural that a person would lose all sense of the correctness of action.

Saffron Dreams offers a very different experience of displacement. Despite moving to the United States, the protagonist, Arissa Illahi, does not face culture shock as an effect of displacement that one would have expected from someone coming from Pakistan. Arissa had visited the United States multiple times before moving here permanently and hence her initial days were quite normal. Her feeling of displacement was limited to getting caught in a sudden rain in the streets of New York:

At once, vibrant umbrellas sprouted up on all sides; everyone seemed prepared but me. I saw the silent acknowledgement in the eyes of New Yorkers that at once declared me an outsider. (35)

If getting wet in a sudden downpour was the only consequence of her unfamiliarity of the place, Arissa would have been the most fortunate of migrants. She experiences genuine displacement only in the aftermath of 9/11, the event that changed the very values of the place. All of a sudden, the city that had become familiar over the many intimate moments spent strolling in its streets has become unfamiliar. For Arissa and the Pakistani Muslim community in the United States, the equation had changed drastically. They were assailed not by mere bereavement and loss of sense of security that every American faced at the time, but were further isolated by a new rhetoric of othering once the religious identity of the hijackers of 9/11 became clear. The city and its people had all of a sudden turned strangers following a different set of rules, but more of that later.

The unfamiliar also appeared to her in the form of Faizan's choice of job – waiting tables at a restaurant. To Arissa who grew up in a privileged family, to have a waiter for a husband was unthinkable. Also it was difficult for her to accept that someone with a master's degree would choose to wait tables because where she came from there was no dignity of labour but dignity by labour.

The experience of displacement in *World and Town* differs from the so far mentioned texts in that the context of displacement is different here. As opposed to the experiences of Tehmina and Arissa, the primary characters in this text were involuntary immigrants. As such, their experience of migration is forever tinged with grief. In the characters of Hattie, Chhung, Sophy and Mum, the sense of loss caused by displacement is explicitly portrayed. When Hattie first came to the States as a child, she lived with her maternal family. Though prepared for the unfamiliar food and the very different cutleries, what baffled the young child was the silence at the table (276). Thrust among her white relatives, Hattie became aware of her difference from everyone as an interracial person. She for the first time realized that it was her fate to be a foreigner. When she moved to the Hatch household in Riverlake, a town she would come back to after her retirement, she was further exposed to the very different American way of life where knives that were considered inauspicious in China were acceptable as wedding present (231).

But Hattie at least had her English. When the Chhungs escaped to the United States from Cambodia, they were completely unprepared for America. A trained engineer back home, Chhung fails to find a job to fit his stature in the United States. But the trial that was the most difficult for the Chhung couple was the raising of kids in the United States. Chhung is unable to accept what he considers as unacceptable behaviour in his children. This in turn creates a rift between the father and his four children which eventually destroys the family.

Dealing with nostalgia:

People have different ways of dealing with nostalgia. In case of immigrants, nostalgia does not simply take them to a different time but a different place. Nostalgia initially was focused around place rather than time when it was first coined as a term implying acute homesickness. It was more about a longing for a particular place than a different time. Over time, nostalgia came to be associated with the idea of a lost time. With the wide scale mobility of the present times, nostalgia again has come to be associated with the idea of place, particularly in the case of migration studies. The United States exalted for its newness is the most vulnerable to it – its newness being a construct comprising of uprooted individuals, it suffers majorly ‘from the “disease” of nostalgia as “homesickness”’ (Cross 17).

Tehmina takes recourse to her memory to come to grips with her nostalgia:

In my mind, I travel through time and space in ways you cannot even dream of—from Ohio to Bombay to Ohio again; from the land of the living to the land of the dead, where my Rustom resides; from my wallpapered bedroom in this house, to my painted bedroom in Bombay, of which I know every inch—where the embroidered handkerchiefs are kept in the bottom drawer of the chest of drawers; what books are on the bedside table; the color of the frame that holds the painted picture of Lord Zoroaster that Rustom got me for my fiftieth birthday. (*If Today* 20-21)

She actively revisits her memory to relieve her happy past. Bombay as she imagines it is an escape for her as well as still an alternative. Therefore, in Tehmina's case, her nostalgia does not torment her. Her sense of identity is derived from her relationship with a person, Rustom her husband, than any place. As such, she is nostalgic most for her times with Rustom than anything else.

Having said that, it is interesting to observe how the most mundane of things can make one nostalgic for the homeland: "To bite into an American apple or an orange was to taste disappointment. Nothing burst with flavor, nothing tasted as sweet or as tangy the way fruits did in Bombay" (35).

Food is one of the most important components that one has to negotiate with when one is an immigrant. But Tehmina's reaction to American fruits is not unbiased; it is very much affected by her longing for Bombay. One is reminded that one is far from home at every step. What one does under such circumstances is try to look for new options. In Tehmina's case, this was going to the farmer's market:

Shopping at the farmers' market was like shopping in Bombay—noisy, crowded, buzzing with activity. Touching the fruit and vegetables, occasionally haggling with the vendors, tasting their offered samples of cut fruit, all made her feel human, like the market was rooted in a section of the world she still recognized and lived in. (35)

This is how immigrants like Tehmina try to find the parallels of home in the United States. But home itself remains elusive.

In *Saffron Dreams*, Arissa too is a frequent visitor to the past, giving in to the happy and unhappy memories from home. In her struggle for daily life, she mourns the loss of the

affluent comfort of a home run by servants. Never having had the necessity to cook, she is a complete stranger to the affairs of the kitchen. Like Tehmina, Arissa too lived a protective life till the death of her husband and for her again, nostalgia is centred on a person, Faizan, her husband. In the aftermath of losing Faizan as she faces displacement all over again, she nostalgically recollects the way of grieving back home:

Losses mean different things in different parts of the world. Where I come from, healing begins with forgetting; in other societies, healing is achieved by dedicating yourself to certain causes. The concrete walls of women's hearts in the peninsular landmass of the Indian subcontinent seal off emotions, thereby achieving absolute sterility that can only lead to isolation. The dreaded word death scares my people; losses make them uncomfortable, nervous. They do the only thing they know to do: shy away and distance themselves. As I do now. (117)

But in her adopted homeland, Arissa is not allowed to even grieve her loss in her own way. Her loss is not respected, not even acknowledged by the grieving country. Even as the country distances itself from its Muslim members, they are not allowed to distance themselves but are rather persecuted. This will be explored in detail in the later section.

Arissa tries to find a semblance of home in the vast "multilingual ethnic neighbourhoods" of Queens:

Walking among folks from the continent we came from lifted our spirits, although we rarely stopped to converse with anyone. They were a calming presence in our midst, moving around urgently as if living in the present would somehow devour them. (119)

The longing for homeland is not explored much in *Saffron Dreams* since the focus is more on events that transpired in the United States but the aforementioned quote reveals that the sense of home in the sense of belonging to a people remains important to every immigrant.

World and Town is permeated with nostalgic longings for the impossible past. Forced to leave their different homelands behind across different times, Hattie, Chhung and Mum share a loss that refuses to be made up by anything else. In Hattie's case, a lifetime spent in the United States does not free her from her childhood memories of Qufu. Her father's philosophy continues to remain a big part of her life. As for Chhung: "He still talks about it sometimes. Like about the roof garden, and the garage for the car, and the big gate in

the garden wall with a guard to open and shut it” (136). The nostalgia makes it difficult for Chhung to reconcile with his present. His nostalgia also renders him a stranger to his own children who are unable to imagine an alternative world of privilege because they cannot see beyond their immediate poverty and the fact that their mother cleans houses for a living. For Chhung though his nostalgic rants allow him to come to terms with his bleak present – a life as an immigrant living with his brother’s peasant wife with unruly, disappointing children and little hope for the future.

In *Native Speaker*, the *ggeh* (Korean rotating credit institution) served as a site that brought the men together. More than business, these meetings were occasions to indulge in each other’s company. The members of the *ggeh* would get together with their families and go for picnics. They never talk about their old lives in Korea but they did share a sense of “how lucky they were, to be in America but still have countrymen near” (56). The cold war era Korea evoked complex nostalgic feelings – too traumatic to discuss in words yet the longing for the homeland is sought to be mitigated through the companionship of countrymen.

No matter how overwhelming nostalgia gets, one still needs to negotiate the experience of life in a new place. The practicality of everyday life demands that one adapts to the new conditions. Immigrants try to deal with their overwhelming sense of loss, alienation and nostalgia, by trying to find newer themes around which they can centre their being. Tehmina tries to make her life meaningful in the strange land through her friendship with Eva Metzemaum. Eva is her sole confidant in the United States, the person she is closer to than her son. In her trial period of living with her son’s family, Tehmina realizes that she needs to be more independent as well as self-reliant in order to enjoy the freedom that the United States offers. To this end, she makes Eva promise to teach her driving:

She would not wish any of them success or prosperity or wealth because the magic was in the dreaming. She knew that now. America had taught her that. How wise, to talk about the *pursuit* of happiness and not of happiness itself. (*If Today* 295)

Learning to drive implies taking control of one’s mobility. The fact that Tehmina is willing to learn driving implies a growth in her character as well as indicates that she is finally in control of her life. She knows that driving on its own does not ensure that everything in her life would fall into place, but she too has now given in to the philosophy of “*pursuit* of happiness and not of happiness itself”. Deciding to leave her

beloved Bombay forever, Tehmina settles for her new friendship, close proximity to her only family and the possibilities that the United States offers even to its elderly immigrants.

Arissa in *Saffron Dreams* after temporarily losing the will to live after the death of her husband, finds new meaning in life in her son, Raian. In caring for her severely disabled son, she finds her purpose in life.

Before I had Raian, I measured my life in two major chunks: before and after Faizan... Raian's birth changed that and brought me closer to letting go... My life fell into a single-minded routine, milestones measured by Raian's accomplishments. I created a chart of my own and put green dots on days he did something new, like walk, eat, or laugh... (174)

Her decision to survive the particular harshness post 9/11 all alone was initially based on her firm belief that her adopted homeland offered better opportunities for her child. When Faizan was alive, she had vehemently opposed his decision to raise the kids in Pakistan. Once the child was born, his severe medical condition determined Arissa's fate. Such medical facilities were possible only in a first world nation.

Arissa also goes back to dabbling in painting. In addition to this, she completes Faizan's unfinished novel and sees it through publication. Besides these, she also starts working at *Chamak*, a journal, as an associate editor; a job that exposes her to immigrants and their stories every day. Thus, slowly Arissa forms a new web of significance comprising her job, her son and her art.

World and Town opens with Hattie trying to find a new objective in life. After her move to the United States a lifetime ago, she had decided to live her life by the principles of science. She studied science, became a scientist and when thwarted, became a teacher of science. But in her retirement, having lost her husband and best friend at the same time, with a grown-up son settled abroad, Hattie is again trying to find a new purpose. Her move back to Riverlake, the place which really started off her American adventure, suggests that the web of significance that she had created for herself in all this time has unravelled. In this second phase of her American life, the very town of Riverlake provides her with a new purpose in life. The town that had resisted the outside world for the longest time is finally threatened by the influence of globalization in the form of a proposed cell phone tower. The vast majority of the town folk opposes it. Hattie, despite

her loyalty to science and her position as an outsider once upon a time, finds herself protesting the intrusion of technology and newness into the Riverlake landscape. To complicate things further, she also finds herself taking a keen interest on the Chhung household – another newness in the town that, like the cell phone tower, is a blot on the landscape in its trailer presence. Between her walking group, her rekindled affair with Carter Hatch, caring for the Chhungs and fighting for the town, Hattie, the forever foreigner, does manage to find a pretty strong web of significance for herself.

In *Native Speaker*, the protagonist Henry Park fails to create any sustainable web of significance for himself. Although second generation, Henry finds himself unable to find his true position in the American setup. Secretly ashamed of his Korean identity and even more ashamed that he feels that way, Henry is driven by conflicting emotions. His marriage to a white woman, Lelia, is endangered even before the death of their son by Henry's work as a spy. His life as a spy prevents him from forming any meaningful connection at work. Henry remains a loner, an outsider throughout because till the very end, he fails to find anything to identify with:

We worked by contriving intricate and open-ended emotional conspiracies. We became acquaintances, casual friends. Sometimes lovers. We were social drinkers. Embracers of children. Doubles partners....

Then we wrote the tract of their lives, remote, unauthorized biographies.

I the most prodigal and mundane of historians. (19-20)

Like a historian, like a biographer, like an actor, Henry Park always finds himself outside the action. When he does get involved, it ruins the authenticity of his role and jeopardizes his venture. Henry's choice of work life ensured that he could not seek any web of significance.

In *If Today be Sweet* and *Saffron Dreams*, the displacement was voluntary; both Tehmina and Arissa had a say when it came to moving to the United States. Also hypothetically, both of these characters have the choice of moving back to their place of origin if things do not work out in their new country. Loss is not loss till it is final. In that sense, Tehmina and Arissa's sense of loss of home is quite different from that experienced in *Native Speaker* or *World and Town*. Here the loss is permanent. Henry Park had never known another country and there is no escape from his inability to feel at home in his country of birth. He is doomed to be the outsider inside always (*Native Speaker*). The Chhungs can no more return to Cambodia than Hattie can return to China. It was not just

their home that they had lost; there is nothing that exists of the landscape that defined home for them. War had eradicated all trace of what constituted their familiar land.

When she had left China, Hattie, although a small child was aware that she might never see her home again in light of the changing circumstances, brought about by the Cultural Revolution. She was supposed to have been joined by her parents in the United States at the first opportune moment. But that never happened. They mysteriously died of illness right after Hattie left for the United States. Hattie's loss of homeland is thus tied up with the loss of her parents. It is an irreparable loss, a loss that cannot be overcome but accepted as final. In contrast to Hattie, the sadness of Chhung's position is that he refuses to accept that his loss of homeland is as final and irrevocable as Hattie's. Chhung talks of going back to Cambodia at times, but the Cambodia that was his home does not exist anymore.

“*Cambodia*,” her dad said after that. His eyes were even more jittery than usual when he was high, and huge-like. “*We should move back to Cambodia.*” (World 138)

Chhung had to leave his home in Cambodia for his ancestral village in the rural area when the Khmer regime began. To him, home is the place in the city in Cambodia where he worked and carved out a new identity for himself. More than the loss of his country, his extended family, he rues the loss of his beautiful wife who gave meaning to his self-fashioning. Home to him was Phnom Penh where he had started a new life, where “he got a big deal job as an engineer and grew a potbelly like a rich person and took a fancy name and started talking like somebody from Phnom Penh instead of from Battambang” (134). For Chhung to leave this elaborately planned life and go back to the countryside is a major shift on its own and then to lose everything and move to a refugee camp was still more painful. By the time of his third movement to the United States, he had lost everything that was dear to him. The only familiar element left to him was Mum, his sister-in-law, who becomes his common-law wife with whom he finally moves to the United States and starts a new family, along with Sarun, the possible nephew whom they “identify” at the camp (138). Yet even years later with three adolescent daughters he cannot reconcile to his loss.

Model minorities:

In the official United States rhetoric, Asian Americans are often extolled as model minorities. They find frequent praise as a community for being hardworking, acquiescing, and polite. Critics have argued that this tendency to portray a people as model minority arises from a need to shape the people into a particular role that the society needs them to play out. Model minority is a construct to appease a people while ensuring they remain subservient to the hegemonic powers.

In the texts under consideration, we see different characters subscribing to this notion of perfectness. The goodwill of the supervisor becomes a reward on its own, an end in itself rather than being a means to an end. People, who subscribe to a different code of conduct in private, find themselves holding on to a different set of principles in public just to have the validation of being model citizens; content when reassured, tormented when rebuffed.

In *If Today be Sweet*, both Tehmina and Sorab try hard to adhere to activities that would be in keeping with the conduct of a model citizen. Tehmina tries to live by the nonverbal dictates of her white daughter-in-law, Susan. She tries to restrict her actions to meet Susan's approval. Her unconscious acknowledgement of white superiority is revealed in her appreciation of Sorab's boss's house:

Joe Canfield's house felt broken-in, worn, and comfortable as an old shoe. There was something distinctive about it, something that bore the imprint of the owner and the weight of family history. ... Was it a question of old money versus new money? ... Maybe because Joe Canfield was a rich man, he could afford to not replace a carpet that was fraying or a couch that had a tear in it. ... So maybe immigrants such as the Jasawalas had to constantly prove their success to the world. That's what she liked about Joe's house, she realized—it had nothing to prove to anyone. It just stood in the same space it had occupied for God knows how many years, and if it was a little bent and if it was a little shabby, well, so be it. (245-46)

She recognizes the fact that immigrants do not dwell in the same plane as these old people of the new world. She knows the hardship that her son and others like him go through to make their fortune in the United States. At the same time, she cannot help but admire the confident unassuming presence that people like Canfield possess from

generations of living there. She however fails to notice that it is these very people who claim complete loyalty from their “subjects”, making it clear that they are quite dispensable and that the least offence would result in their being removed from service. It is these people who keep the immigrants ever vigilant, pitting them against others.

In *The Karma of Brown Folk*, Vijay Prashad traces how historically Asians have been pitted against other communities as the lesser evil. He questions the complicity of Indians to adhere to this given role and urges them to “refuse this role and find other places for ourselves in the moral struggles that grip the United States” (ix). He writes:

What does it mean ... for us to mollify the wrath of white supremacy by making a claim to a great destiny when we are ourselves only a product of state engineering through immigration controls and of the beneficence of more socialized systems of education in South Asia, or when we are but the children of those who have accumulated a certain amount of cultural capital because of those processes? (*Karma* viii)

Prashad’s critique is directly applicable to Tehmina’s appreciation of the Canfield’s easy life. Tehmina although a new immigrant is already persuaded into thinking of a particular lifestyle as well as a particular people as superior to others. Yet the pursuit of such a lifestyle that drives the thousands of immigrants like her son is considered undignified by Tehmina. This is in a way reminiscent of the dilemma of Austen times when class was of primary importance but social climbers were considered the very dregs of humanity.

In a similar vein, Sorab who considers himself pretty successful in the workplace does not self-reflect on his own conscious decisions to live up to the title of the model minority:

His last annual evaluation had been as glowing as the one before that. In fact, Sorab usually thought of the phrase *glowing evaluation* as one word, stitched together by the uniform praise he garnered from his superiors. Let the other executives spend their hours looking over their shoulder and fretting about who was catching up on them. Let them spend their evenings crafting the exact words with which they would ask their bosses for a raise. Sorab had never asked for a raise in his life; in fact, every time he switched jobs he never so much as asked his new salary, knowing that it would be more generous than his last. (*If Today* 45-46)

Sorab's blind faith in the system arises from his knowledge that he had given his best to his work. The fact that he does not utilize his vacation time is a matter of pride for him, not dismay. His confidence in the face of stiff competition rests in being rewarded for his model minority status. It is not until Grace Butler, his new boss, starts discriminating against him that Sorab starts to feel the pressure.

“Yes, but that's what's made Joe such a success,” Sorab said. And even to Tehmina's biased, affectionate ear, her son's words sounded a little too fawning and obvious.

But Joe didn't seem to have noticed. (247)

Sorab models himself as the ideal immigrant employee, eager to show his ability to his employers. He would have been as eager to please Grace had she given him the chance. It is interesting to see that Sorab does not at all question the fact that Joe never reached out to him prior to Tehmina becoming a local celebrity; he fails to see through the publicity gimmicks used by the firm.

Both Sorab and Tehmina seem to be extolled as well as petted in affirmation to Wong when she writes:

Asian Americans are permanent houseguests in the house of America. When on their best behavior (as defined by the hosts), they are allowed to add the spice of variety to American life and are even held up as a “model minority” to prove the viability of American egalitarian ideals. (*Reading 6*)

When Tehmina acts to rescue two little boys from the abuse of an irresponsible mother, she clearly transgresses the American norm of minding one's own business. But in the aftermath of her very Parsi/Indian act of kindness, she is quickly appropriated by the American media as a Christmas miracle, turning Tehmina into the visible face of “American egalitarian ideals”.

Likewise, in *Saffron Dreams*, Faizan too before his death in the Twin Towers attack, tries to conform to the role of a model minority citizen. An orthodox Muslim in his personal beliefs who insists on the hijab for his wife, Faizan nonetheless is a charismatic waiter in a restaurant charming the regular customers to the extent that although a stranger, they remember him.

“Presentation, my dear wife, is the key,” he used to say. “How else can you leave a lasting impression?”

And he didn't miss making that final impact on a total stranger either. (127)

Months after his death, a customer whom he served coffee that fateful morning contacts Arissa to offer her condolence. Faizan, as opposed to the Muslim terrorists who brought down the Twin Towers was a good American Muslim, a deserving citizen the United States would like to claim for its own.

Prashad had noted that the 1965 change in immigration policy was derived from a need to compete with the technologically advanced USSR. This had led to the immigration of the greatest number of highly skilled workers to the United States further prompting as well as solidifying the myth of the successful model minority; their financial success being guaranteed by their socio-economic as well as academic background. But even earlier, Asian Americans from the far east were highly valued for their service and subservience. From construction to farming to restaurants to laundries to domestic workers, the Asian American was the ideal provider of service as opposed to the blacks or Hispanics – quiet, undemanding and hardworking. Newer works of fiction by Asian American writers (Julie Otsuka, Fae Myenne Ng, et al.) imaginatively detailing the Asian experience of these shameful times continue to throw light on the pitiful conditions of a highly discriminated people. Although Jiménez and Horowitz argue that the evolving character of United States society with its large immigrant presence leads to norms being “constructed, altered, and contested” (850), it can still be said that the myth of the model minority continues to shape generations of immigrants.

Thus Hattie in *World and Town* arriving as she did in the middle of the twentieth century was not exempt from the discourse of the model minority. If anything, the times had not yet evolved to extol the “petting” to the model minority narrative. Hattie lives in the Hatch household, pampered and cared for but never quite taken seriously. Yet what perhaps equated her status to that of a household pet is the family’s dismissal of her for what she is:

They were as interested in Confucius as her mother’s family had been in soy. She tried to explain that her family was only pángzhī—a side branch of the family tree, or not even that. A twig. She tried to explain that her parents were from Qingdao—a big city, a port city. ... The Hatches listened. But things Confucian had a special handle for them—Miss Confucius, they called her. “What would Confucius think of Kerouac?” they liked to ask. “What would Confucius think of Brylcreem?” It was just how American families were, she thought, full of banter; and how much better to be bantered about than not, especially since, as the

reality of her situation began to dawn on her, she could not always leave her room. (230)

Her parents had turned their back on the Confucian way of life, considering it “hogwash” as Hattie often repeats to herself. Ironically though even after being in the United States for half a century, she is still called “Miss Confucius”. Despite being largely supported by the Hatch family in all her endeavors, the patriarch, Dr. Hatch, still bars his son Nick from marrying Hattie. All her life, when in the Hatch household and after moving out, Hattie lived her life trying not to be either trouble or disappointment for the family.

In a similar way, Henry Park in *Native Speaker* internalized the story of the good Korean and the bad Korean at school when the junior encyclopedia informed him that “Kim Il Sung, the Communist leader.... was a *bad* Korean” (258). The exposure to that one piece of information leads the young Henry to understand what is expected of him as a good Korean.

“So my report was about the threat of Communism, the Chinese Army, how MacArthur was a visionary, that Truman should have listened to him. How lucky all of us Koreans were.”

“You really felt that way?”

“More or less, when I was little. Sometimes, even now....” (258)

The grown man continues to live under the shadow of the indirect nudge received at childhood. Although critical of such narratives, he cannot but be still swayed to conform to the norms laid out for him.

Saffron Dreams presents the predicament of Arissa who loses her husband in the 9/11 attack, and has to manage an advanced pregnancy along with life in an increasingly anti-Muslim United States. Arissa had always championed the United States as the country that can offer much more to her children than any other nation in the world. She had proudly chosen to make it her adopted homeland. But in the aftermath of 9/11, she becomes unacceptable like the rest of the Muslims in America. Arissa no longer enjoys the protection of the law like the average citizen. The country has considered her complicit with the terrorists because of the shared faith between them and hence is not willing to expend its resources on her. It does not actively persecute her but at the same time it is not much concerned if they face persecution from other agents.

Saffron Dreams reveals how the entire American Muslim community found itself in a state of exception once the religious affiliation of the perpetrators of the 9/11 came to be known:

After the first list of the hijackers' names and nationalities was published, many Arab and Asian immigrants put up American flags on cars and shops, signs of solidarity laced with the hope of evading discrimination. It was a desperate attempt to show loyalty to a nation under attack. Immigrant cab drivers were spat on and ridiculed, and ethnic restaurants put up "God Bless America" signs after some were vandalized. With every horn or commotion on the street, they jumped, then withdrew a little more within themselves, guilt-ridden with sins they did not commit. They walked faster when alone. Some women took down their hijabs, afraid of being targeted, and adopted a conservative but Western style of dressing. Men cut their beards....A few close friends changed their names—Salim became Sam, Ali converted to Alan—in an attempt to hide identities. When asked their nationality, they offered evasive answers. (60)

The alacrity with which these immigrants adapt to a changed way of life reveals their awareness of having been considered as other, as second class citizens always. The significance of this passage lies in the strong images it evokes of the collective fear of a people as they become displaced all over again. The persecutions that these people faced were small as well as big acts. One did not merely change their names, but even their appearance, giving up on religious habits and family values inculcated across a lifetime. Their language, their nationality had suddenly become matters taboo.

Arisa's personal experience of a sense of persecution puts into perspective as to what it meant to be an innocent Muslim in the United States back in those days:

I, too, had witnessed all sorts of looks in the past few days, the gazes from familiar friends who had turned unfamiliar, the silent blank stares of strangers, the angry, wounded looks wanting to hurt, the accusatory side-long glances screaming silently, *You did it, your people brought the towers down*. My people? They were not my people, those few whose beliefs don't even reflect the religion they rely so heavily on to justify their cause. They wrecked people like me more than anyone, who come to this country to lead a freer, safer life, to live among a civilization unaware of the struggles of those who live in restrictive societies. (60)

The victims of an othering narrative, people like Arissa, were left alone to mourn their loss, without anyone's sympathy. The averment of the United States implying the complicity of all Muslims in the attack however did not allow mourners like Arissa off the hook. Anger and accusations followed her everywhere but worse than the anger was the understanding that the terrorists of little faith had jeopardized her existence as a relatively free individual in a "civilization unaware of the struggles of those who live in restrictive societies". The poignancy of the situation is further heightened by the fact that it was seeking freedom that these people had come so far from their home. Now even the comparative freedom is gone, replaced with calls to explain their very presence in the United States. And throughout all these, the law remains strangely quiet in the face of the troubles befalling its Muslim community.

This reducing of a citizen to the level of the outcast is also seen in Nafisa Haji's *The Writing on My Forehead*:

There was backlash in America. Snippets of tragedy totally overshadowed by the mass calamity still unfolding. ... A Sikh man had been murdered. Mosques had been graffitied and firebombed. There were little attacks all over the country, swallowed up into the back pages of history. (272)

The grand narrative of 9/11 swallows up all the personal stories of loss, particularly the revenge targeted against the average person on the street on the least suspicion of being anti-America. The backlashes do not garner sympathy for these individuals who have overnight become the pariah as far as law is concerned. In this novel, the protagonist loses her elder sister, Ameena, to a hate crime. Ameena was shot dead at a parking lot of a supermarket in front of her child in broad day light. She is targeted because she was wearing a hijab. In the best possible scenario, this indicates the failure of the law to protect its citizens; in the worse, it might indicate the apathy with which the nation now looks at these people.

Yet despite being wrongly persecuted, misrepresented and painted guilty, the victims often find themselves feeling guilty without any fault of theirs. In the words of Ameena's husband:

"When she began wearing hijab. All I thought of was what people must be thinking of me. That I was some kind of chauvinistic, Muslim oppressor. It took me a while to admit that to myself...When I realized—what my own objections were—that people would think less of *me*—I laughed at myself. She had the right

to decide. What she would wear. But I should have said something—after what happened. Done something. To protect her. It's my fault that she's dead.” (277)

Born and raised in the United States, Ameena's decision to don the *hijab* was not approved by anyone in her family, least of all her husband. But everyone accepts it. After her death, each person feels guilty about not stopping her from wearing the same. Post 9/11, the hijab had suddenly become loaded with allegiance to the enemy. So if one is murdered based on that, so be it.

In her book, Haji addresses the issue of how the religious persecution arising from fear was not limited to Muslims alone. The persecution in the aftermath of 9/11 was not limited to Pakistanis or Muslims but included Muslims of different ethnic background as well as Asians of religious affiliation other than Islam. There were many real life instances when Sikhs were targeted. Other Asians, particularly South Asians, too were considered a threat by mainstream America and faced abuse. This is reflected in other works of fiction as well.

On the very day of 9/11, the Americanness of all Asian immigrants came to be questioned. Rakhi, the Hindu Indian American protagonist of Chitra Banerjee Divakuruni's *Queen of Dreams* (2004), comments:

“I don't have to put up a flag to prove that I'm American! I am American already. I love this country—hell, it's the only country I know. But I'm not going to be pressured into putting up a sign to announce that love to every passerby”. (264)

Hours later, her ethnic restaurant that she co-owns with her Sikh friend is broken into and their loyalty is questioned, as they are both verbally abused and beaten up. When the police ask her to describe the attackers, she fails to come up with any details, because they were ordinary men one passes on the street without looking twice. It is the ordinariness of these people that makes the situation so complicated as well as dangerous. These are everyman turning violent under threat – how does one deal with it?

Queen of Dreams narrates an incident when other people were assaulted because they were perceived as Asian Muslims. Granted, the direct target was Asian Muslims, but it is undoubtedly true that all Asians as well as all Muslims in the United States had become unacceptable. The state of exception that had been invoked in the aftermath of the terror attacks in the form of The PATRIOT Act, ensured that all Muslim immigrants and in a

broader sense all Asians found themselves under scrutiny by the law as well as the hoodlum element at large. In *Welcome to Americastan*, the Pakistan born father tells his American born daughter:

‘Your citizenship means nothing, bey! This government is very powerful. They will strip you of your citizenship whenever they want. Even if they don’t beat you or deport you, after what you’ve done, now you have a file. On *you*, not some other Samira! You’re going to be under suspicion for the rest of your life! They’re going to follow you around and bug your phones. This whole family is going to be watched. Our phones are probably already bugged.’ (*Welcome* 235)

The fear is very real – the feeling that there is always a big brother somewhere watching your every move is all pervasive. At the same time there is an understanding that the powers that be shall not come to their rescue. There is a mistrust regarding law enforcement. As the father says, “The police in this country are very corrupt. They will do anything to come after you, use *any* excuse” (236). The issue was not corruption or a fear perception but persecution of the thousands who had made America their home, who in fact knew no other home than America. Their citizenship was undermined as their identities were questioned and rejected.

The experience of displacement as presented in *If Today be Sweet* is quite a unique portrayal in fiction. Few contemporary migration novels have looked at displacement as experienced by the elderly in such a focussed manner. Tehmina’s exploration of the United States is geared up only to decide on the question – to migrate or not to migrate at an age when the thought of displacement brings more fear than excitement. By choosing to have an elderly woman as her protagonist, Thrity Umrigar is articulating a criticism against the invisibility that shrouds the elderly in migration literature.

The novel is interspersed with small acts of resistance against the overwhelming American values. Tehmina’s insistence on calling her grandson Cavas instead of Cookie is a case in point. Although Cavas insists on being called Cookie and claims to be an “all-American boy” (71), Tehmina keeps reminding him that he is half-Indian. That is her way of retaining the Indianness in her American grandson. In a parallel incident, she requests her American friend Eva to call her Tehmina instead of Tammy:

“I wanted to ask—can you call me Tehmina instead of Tammy? After all, that’s my real name.”

Eva grew still. ... “Sorry,” she said. “We Americans are so arrogant. We can’t get our tongues around somebody’s name, so we expect them to change their names for us. Happened to so many of my ancestors, too. And here I am...” She shook her head. “Anyway, it will be my honor to call you by your real name, Tehmina. And I’ll make sure the ladies in our card club do so, too.”

“I don’t care what they call me,” Tehmina said. “I just...it’s you that I wanted to use my name, that’s all.” (34-35)

By her manner of asking, Tehmina does not simply reclaim her name, she also makes Eva feel a sense of privilege by making it about her, while at the same time making her point about the American style of assuming things. Tehmina also uses her strong will to quietly guide her daughter-in-law, Susan, to do the “right” thing (14). When one of the neighbour’s little children complains of hunger, Susan is reluctant to get involved since the mother of the children is a difficult person, but on the face of Tehmina’s silent appeal, she invites the two boys in.

But the greatest act of resistance that Tehmina does is when she jumps over the fence to rescue the same children. She had been taught by her son and daughter-in-law time and again about the different values that guide the American way of life – not getting involved in other people’s business being one of the primary ones. More specifically, she had been told to stay away from Tara and her children whom they classify as “white trash” (11). Yet when Tehmina hears the children being violently beaten by their mother, she could not stop herself. She jumps over the fence and goes to rescue them instantly reversing the process of Americanization.

The surprise resistance in the text comes from the character of Sorab. Sorab who is seen to have internalized the American values and American dreams, who had done everything to assimilate into the American lifestyle, who had married a white woman, the same Sorab in a very out of character manner fights to have his elderly mother stay with him – a very un-American concept. It is because of his fierce sense of loyalty to his parents that despite Susan’s many reservations about Tehmina living with them, she tries her best to adjust with Tehmina.

In *Saffron Dreams*, Arissa, is forced to live a life of contradictions in a contradictory land. In the United States which she had long considered the land of security and freedom, she was forced to wear the hijab for the first time in her life by her husband.

Yet when she loses her husband, the same hijab comes to assume a deep emotional significance for her but now, in the changing times, it was no longer possible to wear it without attracting negative attention. Hence she decides to get rid of it:

I slid the hijab from around my neck....The wind tore the veil from my hand, making my task easier. I grasped the cold railing with one hand and swatted at the fleeting piece of my life with the other as the wind picked up speed. It teasingly brought the veil closer to my face. I could have grabbed it. Instead, I let it sail down toward the depths, its grave.

I did not feel a sense of betrayal as I walked away from the pier, letting the wind dance with my hair for the first time... It was a matter of perspective—to an onlooker I had removed my veil, but from where I stood, I had merely shifted it from my head to my heart. (3)

In the face of the constant acrimony, Arissa was in no position to openly defy the society. With anti-Muslim sentiment at an all time high, calling attention with a hijab could lead to dire consequences (as was seen in *The Writing on my Forehead*). Therefore Arissa decides to get rid of her hijab while for the first time internalizing the values of the hijab.

In her own way, she also fights back by refusing to play along with the role of a Muslim being attacked by Muslims in the media:

Muslim harmed by Muslim, how do you react?

How do you?

I hadn't even decided in my mind how to answer that. Our commonness didn't make a good enough story. Like a sack of potatoes, we are all lumped together. Incessantly. Insistently. Now that makes a good story. ...

"Mrs. Illahi, being a Muslim, how does it feel to be attacked by your own people?"...

"They are not my people."

"They have the same religion as you."

No, they don't. They don't have a religion....

"When you put all your potatoes in a sack, you should know they all have unique flavors. Some are rotten, some fresh. Just because they are clumped together doesn't make them all the same."

There was a shocked silence at the other end of the phone. The bitter pill of reality seemed hard for him to swallow.

“They are not my people, but I don’t think you are smart enough to figure that out.” (*Saffron* 123-24)

Shocked and traumatised by the recent loss of her husband, Arissa nevertheless refuses to accept the premise that a religion divides people into right and wrong, that a commonality of religion makes all Muslims complicit with the acts of the terrorists.

But for Arissa her biggest form of resistance was her decision to complete her husband’s unfinished book and see it through publication. To write is to resist the dominant discourse; to write is to give voice to silent suffering. If *Saffron Dreams* is Shaila Abdullah’s way of resistance through which she subverts the mainstream representation of a people, when Arissa chooses to write, she too becomes an agent actively resisting the normative hegemony.

In *World and Town*, the two central stories are seen to employ different means of resistance. For Hattie who has lived the larger part of her life in the United States, resistance lies in her image of herself as a perpetual stranger. The different members of the Chhung family opt for different ways to mark their difference from the dominant narrative. Chhung, the patriarch of the family, tries to instill the Cambodian values of absolute filial obedience in his children. He refuses to follow the diet approved by the American doctor because he claims that Cambodians eat only white rice. Likewise, his wife Mum’s refusal to speak English after more than a decade of living in the United States is indicative of a willful decision rather than a native inability. Mum is the person with the least mobility and agency so perhaps only by asserting herself negatively can she retain something of her own self. Patti Duncan talks about how an enforced silence has been the fate of Asian women in their road to assimilation. Silence then becomes a form of resistance (*Tell this Silence* viii). If writing gives one power, the refusal to speak the dominant language implies her refusal to acknowledge the entire power structure that comes with a language.

Towards a revocable assimilation

The ambiguous relation that an immigrant has towards her adopted homeland has become manifest from the above discussions. It is not the mere push and pull of assimilation and alienation alone that creates the ambiguity, it is more the fact that

assimilation itself is at times, a hopeless surrender and at other times, a necessary compromise. As Arissa says, “Assimilate and accept it all, I decided” (*Saffron* 105). Rarely is assimilation ever an unreserved embracement. From the texts studied in this chapter, the modern immigrants’ experience of displacement seems to take them towards assimilation with the mainstream culture, albeit a “revocable assimilation”. Drawing upon Putnam’s idea of the revocable consent in which one’s affiliation to a particular group is determined by one’s own decision, it can be suggested that much as the society is moving towards a postethnic world, modern immigrants are moving towards the idea of revocable assimilation by which they decide their terms of assimilation. Unlike Bharati Mukherjee, most immigrants to the United States remain ambiguous about their American identity, desiring to retain more of their home culture in their American lives. Therefore, it becomes imperative for them to find a form of assimilation acceptable to them.

By the end of *If Today be Sweet*, we see Tehmina decide on living in the United States:

She would stay. Here in America. It wasn’t so much a decision as an acknowledgment of something she already knew, a logical culmination of her thought process. ... Because, in fact, the decision had been made a few days ago. When she had loosened her grip on that fence, when she had found the courage to jump, she had landed in more than Antonio’s yard. She had landed in America. The fence had been the dividing line between the past and the future, between India and America. Tehmina marveled at the fact that she hadn’t known this until a second ago, that her body, her mind, were only now catching up with her destiny. (293)

The very factors that affect Tehmina’s decision also indicate that her life in the United States is going to be on her terms. When she had gathered the courage to go against her daughter-in-law’s clear instructions regarding involvement with the neighbour’s kids, she had found for herself what it would take for her to survive as Tehmina in the new land. In the light of the warm response that her action elicited, she realizes that there can be more than one way of being a true American. Tehmina’s allegiance to the United States is thus premised on her ability to be herself as well as her choice of giving into the American values is premised in her ability to accept its values without reserve. If there is a clash between what she believes and what the dominant American culture expects of her, she would not hesitate to take a step back from American values. Her assimilation is

by conscious choice based on her understanding of how much she is willing to compromise as an individual. In that sense Tehmina's integration into the United States society is a matter of revocable assimilation.

In *Saffron Dreams*, Arissa makes a conscious choice to continue in the United States despite losing her husband, who was her reason for moving into the country in the first place. Her choice is made for her by her as yet unborn son:

I was certain there would be plenty of times when he would be regarded differently, and the least I could offer him was one less deviation from the norm. Assimilate and accept it all, I decided. Only this society can give my unborn child what my own can't—a chance for a better life and abundant opportunities that he could seize and avail. (105)

The ultrasound had revealed that her unborn son has a severe medical condition. Arissa knew that the life of a disabled person is difficult anywhere, but the United States could at least provide the best medical support. Hence Arissa decides to stay back despite experiencing firsthand the dangers of being a Muslim in the post 9/11 United States.

In the aftermath of 9/11, Arissa like many others who shared her faith, had immediately got rid of all signifiers that identified her as a Muslim. But with the passage of time, there is a slow rebuilding of faith. Her job in the South Asian magazine, *Chamak*, helps her particularly. *Chamak* tries to promote a better image of the South Asian community in the wake of their tarnished reputation post 9/11. The fact that it receives funding from the Cultural Arts Council of Houston implies that not everyone considers these people as threat and that some people actively try to fight the misrepresentation propagated by the media. Being connected to other immigrants through her work also helps Arissa in feeling a sense of community, realizing that she is not alone in her sadness.

The immigrant stories inspired me the most with their level of sacrifice; so much had to be let go to get something in return. It made me even more nostalgic for the pieces in our lives that are lost once we move from one continent to another: the moghra and the mangoes that no longer give off their exhilarating aromas, the henna that loses its hue and scent, the relationships that suffer due to the dynamics of the new society, and the language we lose....What do we gain by moving to a new country, alienated at once from our own type and land? More freedom? Less anonymity? Distinction that we want to lose?

And when we are finally ready to call the new society our homeland, does it accept us willingly? (162)

Through her questions, Arissa realizes that she had survived. She also realizes that despite her survival, her real fight lay ahead in raising a disabled child all alone. By the time she finally picks up her husband's unfinished manuscript, she is ready to assimilate into the American society, knowing that through her writing, through her life, she can always fight the wrongs of the society from inside. By choosing to continue in the United States, she professes her allegiance to her adopted homeland. While assimilating into the wider American culture, she understands that she shall always have to fight back if another 9/11 ever happens and her American identity is questioned. The image of the two Iranian women in scarves best highlights the idea of revocable assimilation (183). In their calm confidence, their unselfconscious gestures, they epitomise the American spirit, yet with their scarves, they make a statement that they are not willing to let go of their other selves in their compromise to be an American.

In *World and Town*, revocable assimilation is seen in case of the Chhung family as they become integrated into the town of Riverlake. Initially the town and the family maintain a wary distance from each other. It is only Hattie among the townspeople who try to forge a relationship with the Chhung household. The rest of the townsfolk fluctuate between curiosity and suspicion of the new foreign looking people in the trailer. But events conspire to bring the residents and the Chhungs together. By the end of the book, a cordial relationship had been established between the Chhung family and the town. The town comes together to help the family deal with old man Chhung's anger issues. It even helps to find work for Mum. But even as that happens, the Chhungs are making plans to move from Riverlake. The family misses the presence of other Cambodian families. The Chhungs are cordial in their relationship with the townspeople, even grateful for their acts of kindness, but they understand that their position in Riverlake is conditional upon factors beyond their control. They know that the coming of more immigrants, even Cambodian immigrants, could jeopardize their relationship with the townsfolk. Thus even as they assimilate into the life of Riverlake, their assimilation is revocable, without any sense of allegiance to the place, reflecting the townspeople's conditional acceptance of them (456).

Likewise Hattie too enjoys revocable assimilation in her relationship with the United States and Riverlake. Hattie despite living all her adult life in the United States, growing

up in white households, chooses to marry a man of Chinese origin and had a Chinese best friend all her life. When after retirement she moves back to Riverlake, she seamlessly blends into the town life becoming a part of several committees, participating in townhall meetings, etc. Hers is the ideal assimilation of the postethnic world where she can choose to ally with any aspect of her person without being answerable for it.

But *Native Speaker* problematizes this idea of revocable assimilation by showing that revocable assimilation remains a utopian idea through the character of John Kwang. Kwang came closest to claiming revocable assimilation but his failure to earn the support of the white and the black community eventually led to his downfall. Kwang had tried to be an American without denying his Korean identity; he had tried to be a leader of the masses, to represent all the people regardless of their ethnicity. He never made his identity as a Korean the focal point of his political campaign; on the contrary, he had tried to connect to every immigrant in the district. In direct contrast to him, Henry Park who has been sent to shadow Kwang had always tried to erase his Koreanness. He had desired to be perfectly assimilated even at the cost of losing out on his ethnic identity and culture. But there can be no perfect assimilation as Park finds out on self-reflection:

I have always known that moment of disappearance, and the even uglier truth is that I have long treasured it. That always honorable-seeming absence. It appears I can go anywhere I wish. Is this my assimilation, so many years in the making? Is this the long-sought sweetness? (216)

What Park considered assimilation was in fact a reluctance to engage with the bitter reality of the immigrant condition. In a Prufrockian manner, he acknowledges his own knowledge of the way things are and his attempt to accept it as such without any negotiation. The failure of Henry Park's attempt at complete assimilation as well as Kwang's attempt at revocable assimilation show that the nature of assimilation shall remain complicated and dynamic at any given time.

Thus, immigrant lives call for huge sacrifice and tolerance in the course of daily living. From the preceding accounts, it implies that being an immigrant one shall always remain a second class, less favoured citizen. This however does not mean that one shall take everything that comes their way without protest or resistance. It only implies that situated in somewhat shaky grounds, their protests would be more contoured, more layered, less direct. Migration accounts are an articulation of such resistance at the same time as they identify different ways of resistance within the narratives.

It is seen that displacement is both a cause and consequence of migration, whether voluntary or involuntary. The educated characters of all the texts are more “citizen of the world” in their experience and attitude. Be it Tehmina in *If Today Be Sweet* or the characters, Arissa and Faizan, in *Saffron Dreams*, they are not simply third world bumpkins who land in the United States for the first time on the day of settling there. They are well aware of the culture in the States having been occasional visitors over extended periods of time. For them, there is no cultural shock as such or rather the cultural shock first experienced has had time to diffuse over prolonged interaction. The language is not a barrier to them in that they are fluent in English, being educated and coming from a particular socio-economic background.

The experiences of displacement varies based on where one has come from – more in terms of one’s socio-economic background than one’s ethnicity or race or gender. The people who immigrate to the United States from India or Pakistan, at least the one who find representation in fiction, emerge from the solid middle class with the middle class values for self-improvement and upward mobility ingrained in them. Also, theirs is a self-imposed displacement. Compared to that, the Chinese are not willingly displaced. Also the political reasons behind their uprootedness ensure for them a roundabout route of escape during which they experience hardships that goes on to shadow their experience in the new land. For most Chinese, the experience of displacement had started long before they immigrated to the United States.

Accepting the United States as home leads to challenging the boundaries of existence as immigrants in terms of physical space as well as emotional limits. In the texts under discussion, almost all characters have subjected themselves to much mobility within the country. They have also gone on to do things that they were “not supposed” to do as in the case of Tehmina’s jumping over the fence or in the case of Arissa becoming involved with a man outside marriage. Calling the United States home thus frees people of their different inhibitions to a certain extent.

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