

## **CHAPTER THREE**

### **WORKPLACE DYNAMICS: RACE, GENDER AND SOCIAL PROFILING**

When you find an attractive, articulate, minority woman in your midst, who's neither too strident nor too soft-spoken, who speaks English without accent or attitude, who makes friends easily and photographs well—you want *her*.

(Helen Wan, *The Partner Track* 101)

This chapter argues that the workplace showcases the complications as well as the opportunities available to the immigrant in America. This is so because for contemporary immigrants particularly, the workplace comes to be of greater significance, since present day migrations from developing countries are mostly in search of better life opportunities and the workplace is the primary site that determines it. This chapter aims to examine the work situation and the racial and gendered profiling therein—how immigrants are pushed to take up certain jobs and denied certain others—irrespective of existing credentials. Through the novels taken up, the chapter will deliberate upon the nature of work open to immigrants of different “ethnicities” as also on the role that gender plays on the assignment of work. For this chapter, we will focus on the workplace experiences from Indian American, Pakistani American, Chinese American and Korean American perspectives. The selected texts are *If Today be Sweet* (Thrity Umrigar), *Welcome to Americastan* (Jabeen Akhtar), *The Partner Track* (Helen Wan), *Free Food for Millionaires* (Min Jin Lee), and *Native Speaker* (Chang-Rae Lee).

Yen Le Espiritu in “Gender and Labor in Asian Immigrant Families,” makes the following observations regarding the conditions available to Asian immigrant workers in America:

1. Due to the perceived vulnerability of their class, gender, ethnicity, and immigration status, Asian immigrant women—and other immigrant women of color—have been heavily recruited to toil in...low-wage industries.... Asian women of all ethnic groups were much more likely than Asian men to be in administrative support and service jobs (*Gender and US Immigration*. Ed. Honagneu-Sotelo 85).
2. The problems of underemployment, misemployment, and discrimination in the U.S. labor market have turned many educated and professional Korean immigrants toward self-employment (85).
3. Despite their high levels of education, racism in the workplace threatens the employment security and class status of Asian immigrant professional men and women. Even when these women and men have superior levels of education,

they still receive economic returns lower than those of their White counterparts and are more likely to remain marginalized in their work organization...(87).

4. As racialized women, Asian professional women also suffer greater sexual harassment than do their Western counterparts due to racialized ascription that depicts them as politically passive and sexually exotic and submissive. In her research on racialized sexual harassment in institutions of higher education, Sumi Cho argues that Asian American women faculty are especially susceptible to hostile-environment forms of harassment. This hostile environment may partly explain why Asian American women faculty continue to have the lowest tenure and promotion rate of all groups (87).
5. Constrained by racial and gender discrimination, Asian professional women, on the other hand, may accept certain components of the traditional patriarchal system because they need their husbands' incomes and because they desire a strong and intact family—an important bastion of resistance to oppression (88).

Based on these contentions apart from others in the body of the chapter, this study brings out the discrimination faced by Asian Americans, especially women, in the workplace. That is not to say that men do not suffer from racially motivated injustice in the workplace as this chapter will show.

The hypotheses that govern this chapter are:

- i) that workplace profiling is a widely held practice in the American context that has for long determined the population in certain areas of work and is the reason behind the predominance of certain ethnic groups in specific fields;
- ii) that even for skilled second-generation labour aware of their rights, the workplace continues to be a minefield to be navigated warily;
- iii) that the glass ceiling continues to exist despite reforms in labour laws, although it has been subsumed by other patronizing jargon;
- iv) that the workplace values are an extension of the wider American values, drawing from it while at the same time, infusing the sense of hierarchy in the employees.

The immigrant condition has always been a matter of concern for the hostland. At best, it is barely tolerated as a necessary evil. A nation as new as the United States, in its brief period of being, has witnessed a lot of diabolical preventive measures for the control and

regulation of immigrants. This is done on the basis of profiling which is nothing but the predetermined treatment meted out to individuals based on the stereotypical expectations of their being affiliated to a certain group. This affiliation may be based on their being a member of a certain ethnic group, their gender identification, socio-economic background, spatial location, etc. Profiling carries a negative connotation because it is based on the lesser qualities of a group. Working in subtle insidious ways, it is responsible for the immigrant condition in a big way. It determines one's location in terms of the physical space of inhabitation (resulting in the production of ghettos where people stick together for protection from the "other" as much as because they are shunned by the "other") as much as one's socio-economic condition. Because one is perceived as something, you one cannot but be that.

C N Le has talked about "enduring cultural images of Chinese restaurants and laundry shops, Japanese gardeners and produce stands, and Korean grocery stores" (16). Such images continue to determine the stereotypes of different immigrant communities and make it difficult for an individual to step out of it. This is the reason why these cultural images continue to be physically present. More than being a sign of one's efficiency in these fields though, it signals the inescapability of a people from a history that was forced on them.

Workplace profiling is often based on race, gender and ethnicity. Women are considered better at jobs requiring soft skills, hence their predominance at jobs that require caregivers. Again the field of work might be the same but a man and a woman's job might see great disparity which eventually would reflect on their income. For instance, in the field of medicine, doctors would mostly be men but nurses are mostly female. This is typical in almost every other field. The fact that there are more women teachers, domestic workers, nannies, or flight attendants is not because women prefer these jobs but because they are preferred in these roles. Even in the same jobs, women end up being relegated to "softer" fields which again reflects on their income. A male lawyer would more often be in well-paying criminal law and a woman lawyer in civil law. Or a male doctor would be more successful as a surgeon and a woman doctor as a paediatrician. The use of the term "ethnicity" is fraught with the danger of bundling a lot of misconceptions together. This is because there is no clear definition of the term. Yet on the basis of such an uncertain classification, ethnic profiling is still carried out. At the workplace, the diverse ethnic groups are deemed to possess certain defining

characteristics that employers rely on while screening the candidates for employment. Such practices are often the result of long held prejudices against the minority groups.

The United States sees a lot of discrimination in terms of allocation of work. Skilled and semi-skilled workers from Asia end up with lucrative job profiles whereas workers of Hispanic origin (particularly undocumented immigrants) end up with low paying degrading jobs. Across the world, patriarchy has determined the kind of jobs open to women for long. The United States despite its being one of the most advanced nations is no different in this regard. The hierarchy of race and gender ensures that women of colour end up in the lowest income group. Any immigrant in the United States is typecasted on the basis of their race. The racial markers are considered to be so overwhelming in a person that one's identity is by default assumed to possess similar attributes as one's race. Assumptions about race go on to play a central role in the kind of jobs open to the immigrant population. The distinctive racial features are assumed to be present within each member of the community and as such, the work assigned to them reflects on these "characteristic" traits.

Various studies have tried to explain the prominence of certain ethnic communities in specific fields. For instance, Won Moo Hurh forwards three key factors that might explain the significant number of Korean Americans owning small businesses – disadvantage theory, resources theory and opportunity structure theory. According to Hurh, "nonwhite immigrant workers are doubly disadvantaged in the American labor market because of their foreign cultural and racial backgrounds, even though many of them were well educated and held a high socioeconomic status in their native land" (58). Regarding the resources theory that makes possible the establishment of small businesses, Hurh says:

The most crucial resources are undoubtedly capital and labor. Particularly for immigrant entrepreneurs, *success* at mobilizing these resources is closely related to the availability and effective utilization of *class, ethnic, and family resources*. ... , the Confucian ethic of honoring one's family by working hard, living moderately, and helping kin and friends (social obligations) seems to have promoted the growth of Korean entrepreneurship in America. (59)

The third theory that Hurh talks about is the opportunity structure theory. Regarding this, he says:

Certainly one must have resources to open a business, but there must also be markets, that is, opportunity structures for immigrant/ethnic entrepreneurship. Markets that have been particularly favorable to Korean immigrant entrepreneurs include the Korean ethnic market and other ethnic minority markets, such as African American and Hispanic American markets. The Korean ethnic market caters primarily to the needs of Korean customers in the United States, particularly their demand for Korean cultural products and services... (62)

Such conditions explain the predominance of different communities in specific fields. Hurh's theory also explains why immigrants remain restricted to these fields and do not frequently seek for livelihood elsewhere.

In the texts under discussion are seen the various ways in which profiling works at the workplace. It leads to the regeneration of stereotyped notions which in turn leads to the validity of profiling, thus becoming a self-perpetuating cycle. This often emerges out of histories of lived experiences of the community as a whole in the course of their presence in the country which implies that different immigrants are considered worthy/capable of different jobs based on their gender/ethnicity. Depending on one's country of origin, one's qualification – both social and job-oriented – is decided. One's credentials are not simply “right” till the person is the “right” person. Studies led by Maher on labour market led her to conclude that, “The hiring process further reinforces such stereotypes by treating job applicants as powerless, identical commodities rather than as workers with choices, rights, and individualized skills.” She further goes on to observe that while the employees themselves “did not appear to adopt or internalize these constructions in their own self-perceptions, they had little choice but to acknowledge and negotiate with them, both in interviewing for jobs and in their later relationships with employers” (*Immigrant Life* 189).

When it comes to gender, a similar pattern can be traced. The female immigrant is twice exposed to the perils of stereotype when it comes to the workplace. Avtar Brah talks about the cultural constraints that Muslim women face in the workplace. She says:

But how do such images of Muslim or other categories of Asian women affect their employment trajectories? They do so when ... these stereotypes are translated into institutional practices with adverse consequences for women's

position in the labour market. ... The general currency of such ideas on a wide scale through the media means that they have become sedimented into a collective commonsense. Their influence can be all-pervasive, although the precise meaning and significance attached to them would depend upon how they articulate under given circumstances. (*Cartographies* 135)

The fact that these women come from cultures that are much more patriarchal in nature than the mainstream American society, drapes these women with a veil of submissiveness, expecting from them docility, and gradually branding them with an identity they would have happily left behind at the home country.

At times, profiling also works as token representation. The very fact of profiling can be exploited to earn social currency by some. One particular person may be showcased, rather her ethnic identity highlighted, so as to give an image of adequate representation. This creates an illusion of inclusiveness and social equality, which is often lacking in the everyday work life scenario.

Through the novels taken up, this chapter deliberates upon the nature of work open to immigrants as also on the role that gender plays on the assignment of work. One's race and gender considerations determine the kind of jobs that are open for them as contemporary immigrants in America. The American workplace is a widely diverse arena where people are frequently segregated based on their race, gender and social profiles. Many factors act as obstacles to immigrants on their way to pursue a career. Conventions, values and egos have to be renegotiated before one can so much as think of having a career. Yet if after overcoming all such factors, an individual finally sets out to look for a job, they are faced with a whole new set of challenges. The workplace is a very select space that is not welcoming of everyone. The chosen texts for study reveal the workplace dynamics of four different communities – Indian American, Pakistani American, Chinese American and Korean American. These four Asian communities occupy a similar kind of standing in terms of education and aspirations. But very often there is a huge gap in the kind of socio-economic background they come from.

### **Kind of Jobs Open to Immigrants**

Even before they decide about their workplace, immigrants are pigeonholed into certain roles. Certain communities are considered as preferring certain kinds of occupations. These assumptions are often based on nothing more than the historical association of

certain communities with certain fields and at times, not even that. Yet because of these reasons, the opportunities open to an individual become strictly restricted based on their perception as a member of a particular community. Preferences for skilled jobs are given to communities that are traditionally seen as more advanced than others. Women are preferred more for “softer” jobs in the skilled section or conversely, for unskilled menial work in low paying jobs. With the third world problems of unemployment and scarcity of resources finding its way into the United States, immigrants have increasingly come to be considered a threat by the mainstream. As a result, stringent measures are being taken to lower the number of people immigrating to the United States.

The four texts under study uphold these ground realities. The texts reveal the limitations that immigrants face as they go about their career. The glass ceiling is set at different heights for different people based on their race, gender as well as social background. As far as entering their preferred field goes, more often than not, educated immigrants end up exactly where they wish to go. Asians are mostly portrayed as practical go-getters who are very sure about where they want to be as well as how to get there. But this again is contingent on ones’ social background. It is clearly implied through the narratives of all four texts that one should be equipped to understand the semiotics of their surroundings in order to make a success of their work life; that hard work is no substitute for soft skills but it is the mastery as well as manipulation of soft skills that actually takes one higher in the echelons of power.

*Welcome to Americastan* portrays the experience of the highly qualified law graduate Tariq Tanweer who leaves the promise of a glamorous life in Pakistan for the United States, “where the water flowed clean and opportunities awaited his children” (76). His law degree being of no use in his adopted land, he had to start over; working different jobs as hotel clerk, repairmen, over-the-phone salesmen, etc. He realised that jobs were not particularly kind to people from his country or of his religion after being called “sandnigger” (76) once too often. He started his business of selling cars after years of struggle:

Joe Tanweer Honda was located in what was considered ‘Auto Alley’ ... The Honda dealership was one of the largest and most successful in North Carolina, certainly the most successful in the Triangle. ... The ‘Joe’ was my father’s idea, thinking ‘Tariq Mohammed Tanweer Honda’ might scare potential customers away. (9)



Armed with the knowledge that his name alienates people and attracts ridicule, he decided to give his business an American twist, ensuring its success. Tariq had found out personally that with his accent and his name, there was no place for him in the American workplace.

Samira, Tariq's daughter, considers herself an American first; so Americanised is she that she cannot properly understand Urdu, her mother-tongue. This is again a consequence of her father's experiences as a new immigrant in the United States. For Tariq, it is important that his children master English so that they are "able to compete with the goras. To excel past them" (78). Samira works as a legislative aide to Congressman, Jim Bailey. When she accidentally runs her car into restricted federal property, her misdemeanour is considered a crime; all because she has a Muslim sounding name. To make matter worse, her name actually turns out to be in the FBI Terror Watch list. It is a mistake of course, but her entire career is threatened by it. This is made clear to her by her own Congressman on whose campaign she had been working so far:

'We managed to keep this story out of the media, write it off as a traffic incident. But that doesn't mean it's gone forever. You know how gossipy Capitol Hill is,' he chuckled. 'People could hear about it and twist it around, in all sorts of ways. After all, your name still appears on that FBI list. People might say I have a security risk on my staff.' He grabbed his belly and full-out laughed. 'You and I... you and I know that's just not true about you. But you understand how these things go, right? It's the way of the world, I guess. Daggone it! It just ain't pretty.'...

'You've been a great asset to this office, Samira. A solid analyst. After the election. I'd love to have you back.' (60)

Her competence, her dedication was completely overlooked all because of her name. To appease his American voters, Jim Bailey refused to have her back despite believing in her innocence. To him, she was a mere casualty. The seriousness of the situation did not strike him as is revealed by his laughter. It was all a joke to him, but for Samira, it was the definite end of a career. Being a Muslim or having a Muslim sounding name in the post 9/11 United States was in itself a flaw in the character; to have a further police record under the circumstances turned one into a virtual pariah. One can only wonder what the situation could have turned into had Samira been a male committing the same

offence. In HM Naqvi's *Homeboy*, three Muslim men, including the narrator, are arrested because they had gone to check on a missing friend and the neighbors reported the strange men to the police. At the very end of the book it is revealed that Mohammed Shah, the missing friend, had actually died in the 9/11 attack on the World Trade Center where he had gone to attend a meeting. But by then the three friends had been "humiliated, starved, physically and mentally abused" (136) to the extent that the narrator decides to go back to Pakistan.

It is perhaps telling that the majority of the characters encountered in the text are engaged in business. The prejudice against Muslims ensured that they could not advance far within the workplace system where they are frequently perceived as suspicious, dangerous or worse. More than gender, the Pakistani Muslims find themselves marginalised by the religion of their birth.

*The Partner Track* tells the story of Ingrid Yung, who breaks all stereotypes to land up in the corporate world of Parsons Valentine & Hunt LLP as an associate. Her success is a result of constant hard work made possible in the face of a fierce desire to be a lawyer so that no one could push her parents around "just because they looked or talked differently from anyone else" (108). Yet one is forced to wonder if it is just hard work and perseverance that has led to her success. As she herself notes:

Tyler Robinson ... The only African American associate in Corporate who'd stuck around past his third or fourth year, he was also one of a handful of openly gay attorneys at Parsons Valentine. In private, Tyler and I joked that together we made up the firm's Diversity Dream Team. Between the two of us, the firm got to tick off four boxes on its National Association of Law Placement diversity questionnaire: black, gay, Asian, female. Four exotic birds with just two stones. (49)

The workplace that snubs her for her gender and ethnicity at every step might just be accessible to her for the same reason. A world that is not yet ready to associate the term Chinese with anything other than food, chooses to include people of different ethnic and sexual orientation, thereby getting a few of the right boxes ticked on paper. However as Ingrid finds out these are only formalities maintained on paper in keeping with America's liberal democratic outlook worldwide.

The perception of Asians, particularly the Chinese, as hard working people who excel as students allows the second generation to compete for white collar jobs. Yet what is equally true is that despite this, the overwhelming notion that persists regarding Asian women is that of a caregiver, which is seen in the following instance when Ingrid is approached by a white woman at a public space who considers Ingrid a nanny:

“You know, I just think it’s so *smart* for parents to get an Asian-speaking nanny these days,” she gushed.

Did I know how to speak *Asian*?

I smiled uncertainly.

“Listen, you seem really sweet. Let me give you my phone number.” Yoga Pants fished a card out of her tiny fanny pack. She tilted her chin toward the stroller.

“Once this one gets off to full-day kindergarten, which looks like it might be any day now, you might find yourself in need of another job. Rob and I have *plenty* of friends who’d just love a referral to an Asian nanny who’s already familiar with the neighborhood.”

She handed me her card. (249-50)

The fact that Ingrid looked “Asian” led the white woman to conclude that she was a nanny. She even went so far as to offer to look up a job for her on the spot. This is how the vast majority of the United States looks at Asian women, and this is also the reason why the stereotype continues to persist – a woman becomes a nanny because that is what the workplace demands of her, not because she has a particular set of skills suitable for being a nanny. It takes on the pattern of a self-fulfilling prophecy till finally a false causal connection is established between the people and the job.

*Free Food for Millionaires* reveals a blatantly stereotypical workplace where particular communities are restricted to particular fields of work. The protagonist Casey Han is a “Korean immigrant who’d grown up in a dim, blue-collar neighborhood in Queens,” hoping “for a bright, glittering life beyond the workhorse struggles of her parents, who managed a Manhattan dry cleaner” (3). Even for a Casey Han brought up in the United States despite her Princeton education and enviable golf handicap, it is impossible to make a smooth transition from her Ivy League institute to the workplace. When second generation immigrants try to venture into areas that are significantly different from their parents’, they realize the lack of social capital that is so essential for success in the

workplace. Social capital does not simply provide opportunities but it is responsible for an entire semiotics of nuances that simply cannot be learned in any institute.

The novel reveals how a person might be penalised because they refuse to play by the rules, without anyone bothering to note that the rules of the game might not be available to everyone. For instance, we see Casey Han falling prey to such a set up of closely guarded conservativeness.

At the Kearn Davis interview, Casey greeted the pair of female interviewers wearing a yellow silk suit and cracked a Nancy Reagan joke, thinking it might make a feminist connection. The two women were wearing navy and charcoal wool, and they let Casey hang herself in fifteen minutes flat. Showing her out, they waved, not bothering to shake her hand. (5)

In the face of such experiences, Casey's Princeton education falls short. Casey's liberal education does not prepare her to expect that the rules of the job market are different for different players. Her outsider perspective restricts her from observing the very contextual world of nuances that plays out in the world of cutthroat competition. It is only years later after struggling to find her way back to the advantages of being an Ivy League graduate that Casey acknowledges her naiveté in her handling of her first job interview.

*Free Food for Millionaires* is rife with characters who find it difficult to go beyond a point in their chosen career, when their chosen career lies in unexplored fields. For a Casey Han, despite her academic excellence, it is not easy to tame success, because of her working class background, which leaves her at a disadvantage when competing with her more affluent colleagues and friends.

It is precisely because she lacked a background that Casey finds herself jobless once she graduates from Princeton with a summa cum laude in Economics. Her hesitation to use her contacts and networks arises from her faith in her ability to find her own way, not realizing that entry into a workplace, particularly a workplace of one's choice, is facilitated by one's networks. It is this stubbornness in the face of adversity that leads her to finally lean on Ted Kim to get the job of a sales assistant, something that is actually belittling for her. The world of banking is a male world where the presence of a woman can be imagined only in the role of a secretary. It is a world where women regardless of

their ethnic background have little scope for advancement. So for the trained but exotic looking Casey to advance within it was quite challenging.

Ted Kim manages to exceed all expectations in the workplace. Despite coming from a humble background in Alaska, he through his hard work managed to get into Harvard. His single-minded focus, motivated by the sacrifices of his parents, actually gets him into the career of his choice:

He'd applied to eight banks in his senior year at Harvard and was invited to join seven. After working for four years at Pearson Crowell, a bulge bracket investment bank, as an analyst and later as senior associate, he got into Harvard Business School, where he was a Baker Scholar. Then he chose Kearn Davis, the sole securities firm that had rejected him as an undergraduate. In four years, Ted was made an executive director, and he was slated for managing director in January. He was two years ahead of his own plan. (58)

Ted Kim does not allow chance to blindside him. His growth is as steady as it is spectacular. His is the true immigrant story of success, making true the premise that hard work alone is the key to success and that if one has determination, nothing can stand in the way.

*Free Food for Millionaires* also reveals how the vast majority of the ethnic population is forced to earn their living engaged in the stereotyped workplace. There is George Ortiz, the Puerto Rican doorman, Howie Chan, the Chinese restaurant owner, and the vast majority of Korean immigrants, who if rich then are mostly owners of family run businesses, and if not then are found working in such family run businesses. For every Ted Kim, there are two others who have failed to get ahead in the system. Even Ted's own siblings fail to escape their immediate reality despite Ted's generous help.

*Native Speaker* gives a powerful portrait of the immigrant condition in the 1990s. Based in the multiethnic city of New York, it records immigrant lives in the ethnic ghettos. In *Native Speaker*, the protagonist Henry Park chooses the offbeat career of a spy. He explains his reasons for choosing to be one as:

I had always thought that I could be anyone, perhaps several anyones at once. Dennis Hoagland and his private firm had conveniently appeared at the right time, offering the perfect vocation for the person I was, someone who could reside in his one place and take half-steps out whenever he wished. For that I

felt indebted to him for life. I found a sanction from our work, for I thought I had finally found my truest place in the culture. (137)

Henry Park struggles with a sense of belonging towards anything. Unable to feel at home either in language or community, he has a deep sense of dissociation from every aspect that makes up his identity. His feeling that he could be anyone is not a liberating feeling; rather it is his inability to recognise his own self. His role as a spy that he considers his “truest place” in the culture leads him to constantly betray his “own” people, because Henry is not just a spy, he is an “ethnic” spy, who targets fellow Koreans.

Henry Park works in a company that specialises in providing information to their clients:

Each of us engaged our own kind, more or less. Foreign workers, immigrants, first-generationals, neo-Americans. I worked with Koreans, Pete with Japanese. We split up the rest, the Chinese, Laotians, Singaporans, Filipinos, the whole transplanted Pacific Rim. Grace handled Eastern Europe; Jack, the Mediterranean and Middle East; the two Jimmys, Baptiste and Perez, Central America and Africa.... Dennis Hoagland had established the firm in the mid-seventies, when another influx of newcomers was arriving. He said he knew a growth industry when he saw one; and there were no other firms with any ethnic coverage to speak of. (19)

Immigrants did not merely make up the firm but they provided its fodder as well. Yet such an immigrant only workplace does not bode well for the immigrant community. A firm like that presupposes on an individual's ability to exploit her own identity of an immigrant to gain trust that is betrayed later. Henry Park who initially considered such a job perfect for him because of his ability to be “several anyones” ends up severely torn within himself. The job affects his relationship with his wife who points out that his kind of work is not something one leaves behind at the office (136).

Yet for Henry who had seen his father, with a degree in industrial engineering from Korea, spend “twenty-five years of green-grocerying in a famous ghetto of America” (53), to venture into a world beyond the ghetto was as important as it was difficult. Faced with the alternative, it is understandable why a young man would be a spy. It is not until Henry meets John Kwang that he realises that there can be other opportunities for people like him.

John Kwang is the Korean subject on whose trail Henry Park is sent. From his humble beginning as a small business owner, Kwang was fast emerging as a popular political leader in line for the mayoral race. Kwang represented the hopes of the immigrant community, not just the Korean Americans or Asian Americans but support for him went beyond ethnicity and race:

Before I knew of him, I had never even conceived of someone like him. A Korean man, of his age, as part of the vernacular. Not just a respectable grocer or dry cleaner or doctor, but a larger public figure who was willing to speak and act outside the tight sphere of his family. He displayed an ambition I didn't recognize, or more, one I hadn't yet envisioned as something a Korean man would find significant or worthy of energy and devotion... (149)

When Henry Park speaks of Kwang, there is awe and bewilderment in his words. The fact that someone like Kwang exists and enjoys such popularity, with his broad face and distinctive Asian looks seems irrational to Henry. To Henry the spy, Kwang's ambition is inexplicable because of his background. He could not understand how someone could dare to go beyond the small successes within the community to become one among the masses. That Kwang's acceptance as "part of the vernacular" is something inconceivable to Henry who had himself married a white woman, reveals the deep sense of alienation within himself.

Thus it is seen that the entry into the workplace is determined by many other factors apart from basic qualifications. It is quite difficult to break out of the mould of expectation that defines a particular aspect of one's identity – as immigrant, as Asian or as woman. Beyond the nuanced specifics, there exists a workplace that works by being blatantly stereotypical. That is the world of the Korean drycleaners, Chinese restaurants, Indian techies, Hispanic labourers and Pakistani businesses. That is also the world where Asian women are relegated to the sphere of the domestics – housewives, nannies, helpers in family businesses. It is when one tries to break out of this defined setup that one experiences stiff resistance as revealed in some of these novels.

### **Workplace Dynamics**

After all the effort that one goes through just to enter the job market, there come the struggles of the workplace. These struggles may take the form of discrimination, issues of respect, erasure of one's ethnic identity in order to assimilate, genuine misguided

identification with the alpha white male, and in the most common case, hitting the glass ceiling.

The workplace has its own sense of hierarchy firmly in place. The stereotypes that emerge through the various sociological studies into the American workplace find reflection in literature as well; its strict enforcement obvious by the presence of characters like George Ortiz, the good-natured stereotypical Puerto Rican doorman (Lee 276); Juanita, the Hispanic middle-aged cleaner (Umrigar 36), to name a few. But it is not simply the presence of these stock characters rather it is their position in the hierarchy that sheds light into this vile practice. The Indian man is definitely below the white woman but he still is higher than the Hispanic woman who clings to the lowest rung in the ladder. As seen in *If Today be Sweet*:

And thinking of women made him think of the dark, thin face of Juanita, the middle-aged Hispanic woman who cleaned the office every evening. He could not leave this mess on the floor for Juanita to clean up. (51)

Sorab Sethna is the deserving vice president of Canfield and Associates. He had worked his way to the top by dint of perseverance and hard work. Yet he is overlooked for promotion; the company instead hires Grace Butler from outside to take over the leadership. Grace is condescending in her interaction with Sorab, although it remains unclear if it is because he is Indian. It is interesting to note how Grace herself exploits the rhetoric of patriarchy to put Sorab in his place, conveniently disregarding his ethnic identity and all that it entails, to just focus on his privileges of being a male, thereby nullifying all his struggles and challenges in his way to becoming a top management executive:

Old boys club? Does she even see me or the color of my skin? Sorab thought. Is she lumping me with all those middle-aged white men who have worked here forever? Does she think I wear green plaid pants and go golfing every weekend? (49)

Sorab is justly piqued by Grace's words. Grace's assumption about the world of privilege being accessible to all men is simply untrue. The experience of a coloured first generation immigrant can hardly be compared to the experiences of being a WASP. Sorab smarts under the terrible unfairness of her accusation. The workplace dynamics thus evolve to fit the discourse of the people in control. At times, one might be undone by one's gender while at other times, it might be race. But what is soon clear upon a



close reading is that these are factors which will always hold one back. When Sorab was passed over for promotion, it was because the management felt that a white woman would be a better boss than a coloured man.

Yet Sorab's own words reveal how he himself is guilty of dismissing Grace because of her gender:

How could Malcolm have picked this flinty, flighty blond woman in her too-short skirts, as his successor? Although it was Joe Canfield, who had founded the agency and now was chairman of the board, who had made the final decision, Sorab knew Joe would have never picked Grace without Malcolm's blessings. Was even good old Malcolm ultimately not immune to the lure of style over substance? And was he, Sorab, such a third-world bumpkin, so hopelessly old-fashioned, so unforgivably *desi*, so utterly—oh my God, so utterly *twentieth century*—that Joe had chosen Grace over him? (48)

It is clear from the preceding lines that Sorab's impression of Grace is very much influenced by a patriarchal colonial mindset whereby even Grace's choice of dress calls into question her competence. The words Sorab use to describe Malcolm Duvall reveal the same problem – his complete submission to a worldview that privileges the characteristics associated with the upper class white man like being patrician, having a British accent, observing strict distance between the public and the personal, etc. It is understandable, although not acceptable, that Sorab would harbour ill feelings towards Grace seeing as how the top management had chosen Grace over him, but to refute all of Grace's qualities based on the way she speaks or dresses is at best petty and at worst indicative of Sorab's condescending attitude towards women. The workplace dynamics at Canfield and Associates is interesting because through the characters of Grace Butler and Sorab Sethna, we get to see how a man has to face discrimination because of his "coloured" identity.

The workplace helps to solidify the power hierarchy extant in the outer world. Within the racial hierarchy of American business structure, different minority groups are relegated to definite positions to emerge from which is extremely difficult. The same thing plays out in the workplace. If as an individual one overcomes many of the prejudices to reach their choice of career, as a people they are connected to certain occupations. In *Free Food for Millionaires*, the demands of the workplace are clear. As Casey discovers of the banking world when she goes for her interview at Kern Davis:

Here and there she spotted a woman, but the vast majority of those who filled the football-stadium-size room with its concert-hall-height ceilings were men: white, Asian, and a few blacks—under forty and presentable. (93)

The condition of being “presentable” emerges again and again when one addresses the workplace. The implication is clear – one has to be first and foremost presentable, personable, to be in select workplaces. The condition of being presentable is however tied to a lot of other things – one has to go to the right institutes, cultivate the right contacts, choose the right friends in order to even get a shot at being presentable. People like Ted Kim succeed after spending a lifetime in Ivy League institutions; Casey was yet to find career success but it could be safely assumed that her interpersonal skills were learnt at such institutes. The vast majority of immigrants, who does not get to go to such institutes, end up in mediocre fields that limit their ability for a good life. The population at the Kearn Davis trading floor is a close reflection of the real world in upscale workplaces: mostly men – white, Asians and few blacks.

Discrimination manifests itself in different ways in different workplaces. Even within the unregulated labour market, within the very same community, instances are seen that makes discrimination a norm to be accepted without question. These places, that provide no insurance or paid vacations, instead rely on a system of “humaneness” and culture to dictate its operating terms. This is seen in the case of Casey’s parents who work in a drycleaner owned by Mr. Kang:

Joseph and Leah Han were the highest-paid nonrelative employees in his company. Joseph earned a thousand dollars a week (four hundred of it was reported, and the rest he was paid in cash), and Leah made five hundred (two hundred fifty was reported), though she worked as both cashier and seamstress. Mr. Kang would never pay the wife the same as the husband, though he always paid widows more than wives for the same work. Like most Korean businesses, European Cleaners offered no health insurance or paid vacations, but for Tina’s wedding present, Mr. Kang had sent Joseph five thousand dollars, which Tina had asked be used for her medical school tuition. (*Free Food* 299)

In instances like these, it is not possible to simply label it gender discrimination. Here the issues at work are a strange mix of patriarchy, convention and practical consideration, although again everything derives from patriarchy. The wife getting paid less than the husband for equal or more work is clearly done to give the man a sense of superiority.

This is how the old world gender relations are codified and propagated in the new world. But at the same time the fact that widows are paid more implies that the proprietors are careful to ensure that no family struggles with poverty because of lack of a man. Yet the owners are not altruistic people – violating the ethics of workplace, they do not offer either health insurance or paid vacations to their employees. The payment for widows only reveals that a single woman could have more means than a married woman, who it was pertinent to keep dependent on her husband for her living. The real reason a successful proprietor like Mr. Kang would try to keep his best employees happy and pay them well would be so that they would not walk out on him, as he believes that, “A full belly is hard to give up” (299). He understands that for poor immigrants, a comfortable survival is everything that matters.

Ambivalent sexism is always at work to keep women away from active competition in the workplace. Susan Fiske in her article, “Venus and Mars or Down to Earth: Stereotypes and Realities of Gender Differences”, talks about this when she explores the stigma related to professional women where it is generally considered that “traditional women are stereotypically warm but incompetent, whereas professional women are allegedly competent but cold” (688). This plays out through the characters of Ella Shim and Casey Han in *Free Food for Millionaires*. Ella Shim is the soft feminine foil to the strong headed Casey. She is warm, kind and loving, and although she is never presented as incompetent, she is definitely not a career-oriented person. In contrast, Casey Han is egoistic and independent and would rather stay poor than remain beholden to someone else. Her absolute refusal to accept the smallest help from her well wishers results in her losing out on many opportunities. This plays out even better when Delia Shannon, the secretary, is contrasted with Casey. Delia despite her overt sexuality is still considered a soft woman because she is seen as someone who has been content in the same position for nine long years. Casey though is restless in her search for a career. She is not willing to settle for anything less than what she desires, defying her father and walking out on her family because he wanted her to pursue law when her heart is set on business school.

Ambivalent sexism is so much a norm in the corporate culture as portrayed in *The Partner Track* that even the victims of the system take it in their stride. The women in the firm realise that the only way to move ahead is by keeping their emotions at bay, by cutting off competition. The three coloured women in the firm are aware of how the system works but do not see the point in questioning it or rather realises that it would be

self-defeating. It is rather sad how the women themselves internalise these norms and turn against their “own.” It is this unspoken system that prevents the women from coming together:

She blinked up at me, and I swear her smile disappeared in about a split second.

“Can I help you?” she asked. Her tone wasn’t unfriendly (not quite), but it wasn’t welcoming, either. Undaunted, sort of, I put on my best interview smile and walked forward to her desk. “Hi,” I said brightly. “I’m Ingrid Yung.”

She remained where she was. “Ohh-kay. And I’m supposed to know you *how*?”

(114)

Ellen Chu Sanderson was a senior associate at the firm. When Ingrid first joined as a trainee, she was eager to bond with Sanderson over their common background of Yale. Also the fact that she was a Chinese woman making her name in a predominantly male world inspired her. Yet Sanderson made it very clear during their first meeting that she had no intention of bonding with another Asian American woman. They maintained their distance throughout their time at the firm.

Ingrid herself internalises this very culture when she rudely turns away the brilliant Zhang Liu, a fellow intern born and raised in Beijing. Although Liu is outstanding in her work, her heavily accented English is debilitating to her success in the firm. She finds it difficult to adjust to the American workplace values which is the antithesis of her quiet self. Soft spoken and shy, she approaches Ingrid to ask if she speaks Chinese. Ingrid lies and says no despite understanding that this was Zhang’s way of asking for help. Zhang leaves the firm after sometime. Comparing herself to the heroine of *The Woman Warrior*, Ingrid realises:

I got stuck on one scene in which the tough, rebellious heroine terrorizes a Chinese American classmate in the girls’ bathroom, pulling on her pigtailed and pinching her cheeks to force her to speak English. *I looked into her face so I could hate it close up*, she wrote. I realized, with a sharp stab of guilt, that that was exactly what I had done— looked into Zhang Liu’s lost, lonely face and hated it close up. (111)

Yet it is not Ingrid who is to be blamed entirely for this episode. It is the setup that demands that one act selfishly in order to survive the world of cutthroat competition. Keeping the inner voices quiet gets to be so habitual that even when one is questioned

directly regarding it, one does not initially realise that there is actually a problem with the setup. Women are the worst enemies of women in such surroundings.

Although there exists in theory a Diversity and Inclusion Committee, this committee limits itself to shallow occasional celebration of perceived “ethnic” stuff like throwing a party at an “ethnic” restaurant, providing dumpling in the menu and such other infantile projects. It is only after a performance in poor taste in the annual firm outing that the committee suddenly realised that it actually had a role to play in the running of the firm. This particular performance offended the Black community and was strongly denounced in the law world. To save face, the firm was forced to bring in an outside consultant, Dr. Rossi, to “examine how well we are doing as a firm to increase diversity and inclusion among our ranks, and to recalibrate our business to better leverage our diverse talent pool” (93).

Despite Rossi’s assurance that everything would be kept anonymous, Ingrid Yung is almost hostile to him. This is because she realizes the pertinence of his questions but at the same time understands that speaking the truth at the moment would definitely jeopardise her chances of being made a partner. Rossi is perceptive though and understands the position of Ingrid far better than she imagines.

The world of Parsons Valentine is a microcosm reflecting how things play out in the American workplace. Everyone in the firm was judged at every moment. It was not mere work that guaranteed the success of an individual in the firm but it was rather the complete personality of the individual that determined one’s success. Since one’s personality is affected by one’s race, appearance and socio-economic background, the system can be quite unfair to a minority person. One has to be ambitious and willing to be a yes man, but without making it too obvious.

The rich sophisticated world of Parsons Valentine is beneath the veneer a sexist, racist, prejudiced world functioning through favouritism. It is actually quite the “Old Boys Club” taking its privileges for granted so much so that its members do not even see the crudity or unfairness going on, much less address it:

When they felt comfortable enough to swear like sailors around me, I knew I was finally in. (6)

In an environment where being “in” entails being accepted as one of the guys, a woman is forced to erase her “womanliness” to fit in. At the same time though, the men would stop at nothing to have their way even catering to the sexual vanity of a woman:

They had scored these sweet offices with their panoramic views by flirting shamelessly with the firm’s office logistics coordinator, Liz Borkofsky. It was rumored that Liz had taken this job in hopes of snagging a male attorney, any male attorney, on track for partner. Finally, last winter, she’d gotten engaged to the firm’s slightly shy, balding director of IT. The joke went around the office that Liz had slept her way to the middle. (8-9)

The system is thus completely anti-women whereby no women can win. No women can hope to impress Liz who is on the lookout for a husband at the workplace. Similarly, the rumour spread about Liz turns her into a caricature of a sexual predator who despite her attempts failed to clinch her prize. Such rumours do not just defame the person but renders them into an object of ridicule.

The hierarchical world of the workplace regulates every aspect of the day-to-day life. At the very beginning of the text there is an instance that reveals how hierarchy is built into the system to reward privilege. The dining room is open to all partners, associates and trainees but “Partners left their trays on the table for the dining room staff to clean up. Associates bused our own” (8). But this is only a slight difference that does not really alienate anyone. What is discriminatory is the practice that secretaries were not allowed to eat at all in the dining room; instead they had to find their own corner to eat their food:

... Margo... was one of the best secretaries at Parsons Valentine... (I’d lobbied to call her my “assistant” instead of “secretary,” but this had been roundly vetoed by the partners, for setting “the wrong kind of precedent.”) As a young associate, I’d had a few rocky starts with secretaries who hadn’t worked out, like chain-smoking Dolores, who had complimented my “very good English” the first time I’d dictated a letter. (9)

The egalitarianism that one might expect from a reputable law firm is utterly non-existent. The “wrong kind of precedent” exemplifies how the workplace is a completely hierarchical but at the same time tenuous setup which something as basic as a change of term might threaten. It is interesting to note the way in which people in different positions try to impose their power on the ones they consider their inferior. A secretary can be considered to be the lowest point of tabled contact within the hierarchy of Parsons

Valentine, yet Ingrid Yung had to tolerate the condescending attitude of a few secretaries because of her “Asian” looks.

Women in the workplace have to deal with much more than workload. They have to put up with overtly sexual looks if not advances in the course of a workday. Even at a huge corporate firm, the choice of dress can make or break an individual:

For women lawyers at a firm outing, the swimsuit question presented a conundrum. Just what should a young career woman wear to what was essentially a pool party thrown by her employer? On the one hand—let’s be honest—law firms valued good looks and sex appeal as much as anyone. So if you were an attractive young woman, you didn’t exactly want to be the class prude, huddled poolside in a parka. On the other hand, showing too much skin wasn’t a good idea, either. Not if you ever expected to be taken seriously again. (59)

There is no easy solution. One is expected to come across as attractive and approachable, while at the same time a little extra effort in that direction could lead them to trouble. This is a situation uniquely faced by women. When it comes to women, being well-groomed is not enough for success; instead one has to master the art of keeping one’s sexuality at a level expected and approved in the workplace.

But it is not simply ambivalent sexism that one has to tolerate at the workplace. More shockingly, women are often outright victims of sexual harassment:

Foster Cowan & Mays LLP had been one of the dozen or so firms in the city that considered itself Top Five—until a few years ago, when six female associates reported being groped by two inebriated male partners during the firm’s annual summer booze cruise around Manhattan. After weeks of stubborn silence, Foster Cowan had finally issued a single tepid statement: *We are regretful if anyone in attendance felt in any way aggrieved by any of our attorneys’ actions.*

Basically, we’re sorry you’re so sensitive.

In an even more stunningly boneheaded move, each female lawyer at the firm had received a ceramic mug and a hoodie. (85)

The fact that sexual harassment actually took place is less worrying than the fact that it took place in a law firm and even more shockingly that the firm refused to acknowledge it as a wrongful act. The firm’s callous reaction to placate the women in the firm after such a traumatic event by gifting them mugs and hoodies reveals the lack of empathy for women in such corporate structures. The backlash of different minority student

associations led to the firm being virtually blacklisted. It took two years for the firm to gain back its reputation and this it did by hiring an African American woman as a senior partner. The six female associates never got the genuine apology that they deserved. Espiritu's observations can be referred to here, to underline the plight of these women. Women thus are reduced to pawns in the bigger game of power, even when they are presented as agents making their way through merit, as in the case of the newly hired senior partner.

The plight of a minority woman in the workplace is evocatively summed up in the following lines:

When you're the only one around of a particular race and gender combination, people feel wildly free to suggest how you should be utilizing your time and abilities. I noticed the disapproving looks on people's faces when I politely turned them down. *No, sorry, but I don't have time to take the foreign-exchange lawyers to lunch today; why don't you try someone who actually works in our International Group? Sorry, I really can't mentor any more summer associates this year. You've already given me Christine Han, Danny Rodriguez, Victor Cho, Meera Patel, and Herman Lim....*( 102)

Ingrid realizes that people expect her to conform to popular assumptions of Asian American women as docile and obedient. She reflects:

Even though I'd felt like something of an outsider all my life ... I had never been made to feel more keenly aware of my Specialness than when I'd stepped through the gleaming glass doors at Parsons Valentine. If I got voted in this year I wouldn't just be making partner, I'd be making history. I would be the first woman of color ever elected to the partnership at the prestigious law firm of Parsons Valentine & Hunt LLP. That was the term they used for me at the firm. "Woman of color." (102)

Being Asian American in the workplace seems to encourage a particular reaction from the colleagues. Like Sorab from *If Today be Sweet*, Ingrid too is not expected to say no to anything related to work. Despite being born in Maryland and considering herself an American, she is constantly made to feel different, "special". She is not just another talented employee, but she is constantly reminded that she is a "woman of color".



Being a woman also prevents one from taking part in other aspects of the workplace, yet these interactions taking place outside the workplace influence and determine the dynamics within the workplace:

How do you think this would look to the partners—I'm supposed to be running this billion-dollar megadeal for Adler's client, yet I'm leaving the office at six forty-five to go play softball in Central Park?"

Hunter smiled smugly. "Actually," he said, "Adler usually shows up to watch all our games. And Tim Hollister's playing tonight."

I frowned. "I didn't know any of those guys came to your games."

"Yeah, they do," Hunter continued proudly. "We all go out for beers afterward at Paddy Maguire's, and Adler picks up the tab at the end of the night. It's great. You should totally come..." (*Partner* 118)

Although the game is an office thing, the after-game meet-ups are informal get-togethers. Since it's not official no one in office can complain about such get-togethers yet these occasions provide the associates a more privileged opportunity to interact with the partners. Most partners take the game seriously and performing well in a game is a sure shot way of impressing a partner. Also huge firms are always expecting their employees to perform beyond their designated duties as is evident when Marty Adler expresses his displeasure that Ingrid does not have much "nonlegal contribution" (99). Women are marginalised at every step. First one is made to strip of one's femininity by accepting swearing and cursing as commonplace even though one might not really be comfortable in such a setting. Yet the sense of companionship achieved by being "one of the guys" does not open avenues for other "guy things", in this instance playing softball. Even the people Ingrid considers her friends in the firm, does not inform her of the advantages of being at the game. It is only when they absolutely needed a female member on the team by regulation that Hunter, a fellow associate, asked Ingrid to join the team.

In a similar way, being a minority woman in a predominantly male field, has other roadblocks on the way to success. The following instance for example is another example of ambivalent sexism:

The office was shadowy and dim, the only light coming from a green-shaded banker's lamp on the credenza. I took a few tentative steps into the room. Jack Hanover was seated behind an antique walnut desk with ornately carved legs and claw feet. Directly across from Jack Hanover, each seated in a wide leather club

chair, were none other than Hunter and Justin Keating. They looked as startled to see me as I was to see them.

All three of the men were cradling highball glasses, with an inch and a half of amber liquid sloshing around in the bottoms.

Jack Hanover's famous Scotch. So that part was true. (161-62)

Ingrid is asked by Marty Adler to seek the advice of Hanover on a matter of fine print. The issue itself is something Ingrid is already aware of but is forced to seek Hanover's output simply to convince Adler. When finally Ingrid shows up at Hanover's office, she sees to her surprise that her assistant, Justin Keating, is already there drinking with Hanover. This world of casual camaraderie is completely closed off to Ingrid, as a woman and as a minority – as a woman because it would be improper and as a minority because the world of Parsons Valentine is a world of unapologetic white privilege.

Such workplace dynamics often discourage women from pursuing a competitive career. Although a lot of women might join the workplace, they tend to drop out because of many different factors:

There had been ninety-five of us in my class when we'd first started out, and over a third of us were women. Now, eight years later in Corporate, it was just me, Murph, Hunter, Tyler, and a handful of other guys left standing.

I was still friends with a lot of the women lawyers who'd left Parsons Valentine over the years. I knew they all rooted for me. Every Christmas, I received an enthusiastic chorus of messages: *Keep up the good fight! Looking forward to toasting the firm's first female Corporate partner!!!! Go Ingrid!!* (55-56)

In the eight years since she joined the firm, Ingrid had witnessed the majority of women leave the firm, most of them to live a life of happy domesticity. Their ambitions were appropriated by the act of living. Yet these women somewhere nurse regret inside as evident by their cheerful rooting for Ingrid to continue at her job; somewhere they realise that they had lost out on "the good fight". The workplace in its own is a competitive battlefield weeding out the weaker ones, but here too the fact remains that often it is the outside world that determines the factors within the workplace.

From the discussion so far it is clear that the diversity initiative in the firm fails to safeguard the interests of its minorities. For instance, the following is Murph's reaction to Ingrid:

“They’ve been dying to announce a female partner in Corporate for years! Problem was, all the women kept leaving. Then along comes Little Miss Goody-Goody here—the *impeccable* Ingrid Yung—and you came and you *stayed*. Hallelujah! Give her another gold star, folks! A woman *and* a minority! Are you fucking kidding me? Hell, you’re a law firm recruiter’s wet dream!” (219)

Ingrid, Murph and Hunter had joined the company around the same time and all three were up for partnership at the time. Hunter is an incompetent lawyer who is “unfireable” (6) because he comes with the right contacts from the right background. Ingrid wrongly assumes that Hunter’s incompetence as a lawyer would prevent him from getting a partnership. In her mind, the competition was between Murph and herself. But Murph knew that privilege is the strongest commendation; he correctly assumes that Murph was certain to get a partnership, the race in truth was between him and Ingrid. When he lashes out at Ingrid, all his insecurities are revealed. At one level, one could actually sympathise with Murph’s situation – he was white but he was not privileged like Hunter and had to reach where he was through hard work and smarts. It is by the fact that he actively tries to sabotage Ingrid’s career which eventually leads to her being fired from the firm that Murph loses all sympathy from the reader.

*Native Speaker* portrays the workplace dynamics within the world of ethnic immigrants. It reveals the inequalities and exploitations that are equally at work within the minority world. Based at the immigrant majority districts of New York, the Mayoral race of John Kwang reveals that the exploitation of minority is not merely limited to the white privileged world but was rampant even within the immigrant domain. We see Henry Park questioning his father on what Henry sees as the cruel way his father deals with his employees.

They worked twelve-hour days six days a week for \$200 cash and meals and all the fruit and vegetables we couldn’t or wouldn’t sell; it was the typical arrangement. My father like all successful immigrants before him gently and not so gently exploited his own.

“This is way I learn business, this is way they learn business.” (58-59)

What seemed exploitation to the America born Henry, seemed nothing more than a rite of passage to his father who had started off from the same disadvantaged position as his employees. To the father, it was not a matter of cruelty but just the way that things get done. A more extreme exploitation of one’s own people is seen in *The Interpreter* (Suki

Kim) where the protagonist's father reports other Koreans in the States to the Immigration and Naturalization Services to further his own interests.

Koreans as owners of small businesses reigned among the other ethnic groups. This resulted in Koreans exploiting other poorer people regardless of ethnicities.

... Peruvians who worked for Korean greengrocers (they were protesting low wages and poor working conditions) .... The Peruvians showed up outside the door of the converted storefront of the new office with their tall skinny drums and guitars and handmade placards that read: "Koreans Unfair." (92)

In a clear parallel to the corporate workplace of the wider America, the ethnic workplace too is rife with exploitations of the marginalised. This might be one reason why people are hesitant to venture out into the mainstream workplace. Knowing how it plays out in the near-to-home scenario would give one pause to pursue an unfamiliar elsewhere that shall offer more of the same.

The run-up to the mayoral election saw the use of the language of subtle racism to render the ethnic contender inferior to the task:

They said Kwang was trying too hard to be all things to all people. Mayor De Roos himself was making a point of half-complimenting Kwang in the media whenever he could, just the week before calling him "a fervent voice in the wide chorus that is New York."

The mayor was a careerist, a consummate professional, and he knew how the game should be run against an ethnic challenger: marginalize him, isolate him, acknowledge his passion but color it radical, name it zealotry. (38-39)

This is the very language that Henry Park fears – the language that is evoked to carefully highlight how the ethnic immigrant differs from the masses. Henry Park who is very conscious of language and tries to speak like a native speaker, is only too aware that there is no escape from such rhetoric. The Mayor's praise of Kwang as "fervent" draws attention to the superfluous Orient of the western imagination, thus creating the image of an unbridled passion thereby reducing his rational appeal.

### **Politics of Representation**

The workplace is seldom seen from the perspective of the employer but it is nonetheless true that a firm's reputation is built on its employees. Thus, it is often seen that a firm

would make an attempt to retain a particular individual to showcase its own magnanimity. Or it might do so in order to adhere to the diversity guidelines that is demanded at a workplace. This might lead to actions that actually end up alienating an event from its context, appropriating it for its own petty need.

In *The Partner Track*, a racist performance lands the law firm of Parsons Valentine in the limelight for the wrong reasons. Because of this, the firm is forced to bring in an outside consultant to redress the issue. They also organise a diversity-themed event in the Rainbow room at 30 Rock to which they invite their clients. The following is an extract from the senior partner's speech:

By choosing to be here this evening, we are sending a message—loud and clear—that we cannot ... indeed, we *will not* tolerate exclusion of any kind in the courtrooms, the chambers, the legal boardrooms, and the hallowed halls of corporate America. Tonight we recognize this truth: that *all* of our institutions are only *enriched* by the inclusion of women and people of color. Racial and gender diversity is not just a trend, is not an albatross *thrust* upon us by political correctness. No, diversity is not merely an aspirational goal. It is one of our *strongest assets*. (194-95)

Marty Adler's speech is highly positive regarding diversity in the workplace. His speech seeks to present diversity not merely as a requirement to be met in the workplace, but as something desirable that actually contributes to more productivity.

But this fools no one. Even before the planned event takes place, Ingrid is wary of the outcome of the day. As she predicts:

“The firm's calling it ‘A Celebration of Diversity in the Profession: Breaking Barriers, Bridging Gaps,’” I said, ... “This is how it'll go down. We all go have white wine and shrimp cocktail, the partners swagger around the Rainbow Room, shake some hands, slap some backs. They show off their fancy new hired-gun consultant, make a few speeches about ‘leveraging diversity’ and ‘celebrating difference,’ and ask why we can't all just be friends. Then everyone goes home with their corporate goodie bag and forgets about it for another year. You know the drill.” (178)

Ingrid Yung is well aware that these occasional diversity drives are token programmes meant to placate the minority working population. In reality though, it is less about minorities than about the organisers feeling good about themselves that “something” had

been done. Ingrid is entirely dismissive of the event, knowing that nothing substantial will come off it. She still has to play along of course because she of all people could not be seen as insensitive to minority issues. Unfortunately for her, even she did not foresee how the event would end up denigrating her work at the firm.

It is the nature of the workplace to appropriate all personal achievements of an individual as its own, reducing the individual to a token of oneself. The fact that Ingrid Yung survived for so long at Parsons Valentine and was at the cusp of being made a partner owed nothing to any measure of the company to safeguard her interests. In fact it was the company who had benefited from the presence of a minority women among the higher ranks:

“We at Parsons Valentine and Hunt have recognized this truth for years, and it is borne out in everything we do—from reaching out to deserving communities in need through our pro bono practice to our efforts in recruiting and hiring, and then developing, promoting, and mentoring our nontraditional attorneys at every single stage of their careers.”...

Adler continued, “And I am extremely proud that we have with us tonight one of the best examples of these efforts—truly a successful product of all of our recruiting, mentoring, and retention programs—Ingrid Yung, one of our most promising young attorneys in the Mergers and Acquisitions group.... (195)

When attacked in the wider world as not being sensitive to minorities, Parsons Valentine does not hesitate to forward Ingrid as an instance of the successful implementation of the firm’s means to ensure diversity; this, despite the fact that Ingrid had often suffered because of being a minority woman in the company. The company is only concerned about saving its own skin and hence is not bothered that by making Ingrid their diversity mascot, they have effectively negated all her achievements on the face of tough competition by implying that the firm had always played a proactive role in “developing, promoting, and mentoring” her and her success in the firm is nothing but the result of the firm’s fair “recruiting, mentoring, and retention programs” – the same Chinese American Ingrid Yung who has more often than not been disadvantaged both by her ethnic identity as well as gender in her official and unofficial dealings with her colleagues as well as employers.

Likewise in *If Today Be Sweet*, when Tehmina is named the “Christmas angel” in the media following her rescue of her neighbour’s kids from an abusive mother, it comes to

factor in her son's career (240, 286). Her being celebrated as a "Christmas miracle" opens new possibilities for her son's declining career (274). Joe Canfield who had previously passed up Sorab for promotion is all of a sudden interested in him. The primarily white world of Rosemont Heights was celebrating an Indian woman for her kindness and bravado, and Joe Canfield being an astute businessman knew how to capitalise on the turning tide. Although Canfield snubs Grace's idea of the full-page ad featuring Tehmina and the two kids – 'Canfield and Associates salutes Tehmina Sethna, mother of one of our employees' (254) – as tacky and exploitative, he himself does not fail to capitalise on the opportunity in a much subtler way.

*Welcome to Americastan* approaches this propensity of the workplace to cash on the minority tag from a refreshingly different angle. Samira's accident at Capitol Hill renders her a pariah in D.C. She leaves the place in disgrace and although her Congressman assures her that he would love to have her back after the election when she is no longer a hindrance to his plans, her career at D.C. was no longer possible as a person vetoed by Homeland Security. For most of the text, Samira is seen worrying about her nonexistent career as she helps her father informally in his Pakistani American Council. She gets her opportunity when Senator Marshall is invited as a guest at the Council. Deborah Banks, his Chief of Staff, speaks to Samira and alludes to her wrong treatment as a common criminal at D.C.:

'... I know what happened to your daughter on the Hill. And I think it's a shame what they did to her, arresting her like that, treating her like a common criminal, especially after years of public service. I think it's a prime example of our overzealous attitude towards Muslims, and that is why the Senator is here today. He thinks this is a very important issue and wants to take the helm in addressing it.' (233)

Samira uses this opportunity to try to clear her name from the FBI terror list. And then, subverting the power relation by which the mainstream always plays the minority, exploiting the minority to further hidden agenda of their own, Samira uses her ethnic cum religious identity to nudge her way back into D.C. Understanding that she as a token Pakistani American Muslim person would be far invaluable for a party that seeks to appeal to the minorities, than as another competent young woman in the workplace, she capitalises on her unique identity to ask for a job as legislative aide with Senator Marshall.

And this is what happens:

It was a long shot. This was a powerful woman working for a powerful Senator. People with even more experience and advanced degrees than I had scrambled for unpaid internships just to get a foot in their door. I was pretty sure if the Hill incident had not happened and she and the Senator didn't have a profoundly noble sense of morality, she wouldn't have expressed her pleasure that I wanted to return to D.C. and told me to fax my résumé over later in the day, that they could always make room for bright, young, fiscal policy analysts in their Hall of Justice. (234-35)

Samira was smart enough to take up any opportunity to come her way. Unlike Ingrid Yung who smarted under the tag of a “woman of color” or Casey Han who refused to exploit her contacts to further her career, Samira Tanweer showed no scruples in using her identity as a Pakistani American Muslim woman to promote her career.

In *Native Speaker*, the question of representation is on a different scale altogether. With the possibility of the immigrant John Kwang becoming a contender running for Mayor of New York City, the pertinent question is – who does he represent?

Although Kwang's power base was every last Korean vote in the district, and then most of the Chinese, he did exceedingly well with the newer immigrants, the Southeast Asians and Indians, the Central Americans, and blacks from the Caribbean and West Indies. Some Eastern Europeans. The native whites didn't seem to pay much attention to him, either way. African Americans didn't seem to trust him. He was a Democrat in name, in the party of Mayor De Roos, but he drew little from that machinery, the strong-arm cadres of unionized workers and tradespeople, white ethnic old New York. (153)

Kwang understands that he would have to go beyond the immediacy of his community in order to appeal to the masses, and hence greets his “citizens in Spanish, Hindi, Mandarin, Thai, Portuguese, him lilting forth with a perfection unborrowed and unstudied: *Keep on, keep faith, we know how you feel, you are not alone*” (286). He knows that it is the immigrants who make up his vote bank – “livery drivers and nannies and wok cooks and seamstresses and delivery boys, and his wealthiest patrons were the armies of small-business owners through whose coffers passed all of Queens, by the nickel and dime” (153-54). To all these people at the bottom of the hierarchy, Kwang's workers have one simple message of hope – “... *Kwang is like you. You will be an American*” (154).



And this is what leads to the unraveling of Kwang. No one could fault him in his attempt to represent different ethnic minorities or desperately trying to maintain intercommunity peace, but what eventually led to his downfall was his choice to represent the illegal immigrants. In a politically motivated move to tarnish Kwang's image, he is found guilty of accepting campaign money from illegals as disclosed by the Immigration and Naturalization Services. The interesting discovery is that these "illegals" are not just Koreans, but comprises "other Asians, West Indians, various Africans" (349). John Kwang, the ethnic popular leader goes down, but he goes down representing all minorities, as the "larger public figure who was willing to speak and act outside the tight sphere of his family" (149).

There is another politics of representation that concerns a reader of these texts, i.e. the writers' conscious decision to reveal what they do. Despite the fact that all the texts portray different classes of people, mostly the texts seem to conform to the widely held beliefs about immigrants. The Korean American work life as revealed in *Native Speaker* reveals the great web of family-run Korean small businesses. Whole ghettos rise up around such businesses. *Free Food for Millionaires*, however, is successful in portraying characters from diverse wakes of life, dealing with the everyday experience of the widely popular Korean laundries and nail-salons to successful model citizens. In the case of Indian American texts, there is no attempt to present the lower-middle class people. *If Today be Sweet* gives the image of Indians as "doctors, lawyers, engineers, businessmen", people who had "come to America and built their fortunes" (53). Characters like the Sardar taxi driver in Bharati Mukherjee's *Desirable Daughters* are rare.

Immigrants often find themselves working in stereotyped occupations. This is because of the demands of the workplace that often expects immigrants to excel in particular fields. But it is also because of the fact that the socio-economic background of most immigrants often does not provide the cultural capital necessary to enter or negotiate the principles governing the workplace expertly. The only way to gain cultural capital under such circumstances is to ensure that one gets through to top educational institutions where one can develop new social networks. Attempts to leave one's "traditional" occupation without imbibing the necessary values required for success outside may lead to disastrous consequences. Yet Asian Americans, who actually make it to the top at the workplace, stand the risk of having their success ascribed to affirmative action. For

Pakistani Americans post 9/11 it is difficult to find work in a structural setup because of their religion. Even earlier, a Muslim sounding name invited rancour as seen in *Welcome to Americastan*. This has led to the Pakistani Muslim community to flourish as entrepreneurs. Immigrants have thus tried to make the most out of the discrimination that determine their occupation.

Limitations continue to exist for different people based on their race, gender or ethnicity despite reforms in labour laws. Men are either overlooked for promotion because of the colour of their skin or if they become too much of a threat by their efficiency, then they are diminished by an Orientalist discourse. Even within the ethnic workplace, there exists a hierarchy of power that parallels the outer world. Businessmen often exploit their fellow countrymen as well as poor immigrants from different communities to maximise profit. The immigrant woman finds herself at the lowest rung in the definitive hierarchy of power which is frequently topped by white men. Ethnic workplaces that run on traditional beliefs and values, often deny equal pay to a woman. Women are frequent subject of sexual harassment at the workplace where they are forced to negotiate between undermining their womanliness while adhering to the expectation of looking good at all times.

Despite the prevailing discriminations, all workplaces try to project themselves as following fair practices so as not to provoke criticism. For this reason, companies take up Diversity Initiatives, celebrate “ethnic” days. The workplace also does not hesitate to appropriate any success of its members for its own, often neglecting the individual struggles of a person to forward its own role in their success. As immigrants become aware of these underlying complications, they manipulate the weakness of the workplace, which treats them as tokens, for their own gain. The only places where immigrants have truly showcased their full potential are places without restraints, i.e. when they are entrepreneurs and working without supervision, and thus without any need to mould oneself to the stereotyped expectations. Migration fiction shows that the only real way to remove those constraints is by being an entrepreneur but that too has its pitfalls. Thus it is seen that immigrants face discrimination at the workplace irrespective of race or gender as their potential is utilised and undermined at the same time. While certain jobs are not available to the migrant settlers, they are often seen engaging in jobs with lower salaries and difficult work conditions to survive in the new place.

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