

CHAPTER FOUR
TOWARDS MUTANT IDENTITIES

Migrancy... involves a movement in which neither the points of departure nor those of arrival are immutable or certain. It calls for a dwelling in language, in histories, in identities that are constantly subject to mutation. Always in transit, the promise of a home coming – completing the story, domesticating the detour – becomes an impossibility. History gives way to histories, as the West gives way to the world. (Iain Chambers, *Migrancy, Culture, Identity* 5)

[S]he world is accelerating and contracting at one and the same time; material and immaterial borders are blurring and becoming permeable...the global permeates the local, while the local dissipates into the global; and the production of human identity is informed by new coordinates. (Soren Frank, *Migration and Literature* 2)

Cultural identities...undergo constant transformation. Far from being eternally fixed in some essentialized past, they are subject to the continuous ‘play’ of history, culture and power. Far from being grounded in a mere ‘recovery’ of the past...identities are the names we give to the different ways we are positioned by, and position ourselves within, the narratives of the past. (Hall, Rutherford 225)

[A]s well as the many points of similarity, there are also critical points of deep and significant difference which constitute ‘what we really are’...or ‘what we have become’. We cannot speak... about ‘one experience, one identity’, without acknowledging...the ruptures and discontinuities which constitute, precisely, the Caribbean’s ‘uniqueness’. Cultural identity, in this...sense, is a matter of ‘becoming’ as well as of ‘being’. (ibid)

The history of the black Atlantic yields a course of lessons as to the instability and mutability of identities which are always unfinished, always being remade. (Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic* xi)

This chapter deals with the uncertain identities that migrants, especially women grope towards as they shift emotionally and intellectually between the host country and their erstwhile homeland. It tries to show how in the process of survival in the new land, the migrant creates a new identity to root herself/himself in the soil of America. While doing this, it remains to be seen whether the migrants leave everything of the past life/ homeland

and resettle and remake everything anew, or do they retain most of their past culture in the new land. The migrants are often seen trying to relocate themselves in more than one sense as gradually they learn to choose from available options. That is not to say they find assimilation easy or acceptable: differences in their language and accents as they speak, their food habits, even approach to life in America is determined to some extent by what they leave behind in their places of birth.

Migrants in the U.S.A. often lead uncertain lives as the degree of their acceptance by the host nation does not end with documentation or even the green card. This sense of fitting in or becoming something is determined by the degree of their assimilation into the mainstream society. In the case of Caribbean Americans, especially English-speaking ones, assimilation appears to be easier till they find themselves in a contest for something where more than qualifications, credentials are fixed by the place of birth. The Caribbean American's self-esteem, ego, and social standing are confronted every day in America. They may have the same coloured skin as African Americans, but their accents and culture lay them open to discrimination. In Paul Gilroy's terms, they are in a trap of "inescapable hybridity" (*Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* xi). At times, they are accommodated as Blacks—as in times of mass protests or in emergencies—while at others, they are excluded as migrants. This makes the Caribbean Americans conscious of their sense of being and identity which remains in a state of becoming, fluid and contingent, never a certainty.

The state of uncertainty that marks the position/identities of Caribbean Americans can best be explained by a sense of being in transit as Chambers suggests in a more general context of migrant identity and culture. He says that:

[T]he sense of place and belonging that we construct there...acquire a form that is always contingent, in transit, without a goal, without an end. Such a journey is open and incomplete, it involves a continual fabulation, an invention, a construction, in which there is no fixed identity or final destination. There is no final referent that exists outside our languages. (*Migrancy, Culture, Identity* 24)

Caribbean Americans have to reinvent themselves as the situation demands and their position and identity remains ambivalent or at best a mix between what they think of themselves and what others in America think of them. Drawing upon Chambers'

contentions, this chapter tries to show that the Caribbean Americans have to rely on construction, even fabulation to arrive at a sense of identity. This is best seen in their narratives, fictional or otherwise. The novels included in this chapter show some of the characters as they look for self-definition and are caught up in a state of in-betweenness. Bhabha's observations on the "enunciative process" which "introduces a split in...cultural identification" help to explain the migrant's dilemma as far as identity is concerned. He identifies:

[A] split between the traditional, culturalist demand for a model, a tradition, a community, a stable system of reference, and the necessary negation of the certitude in the articulation of new cultural demands, meanings, strategies in the political present, as a practice of domination, or resistance. (*Location of Culture* 51)

The migrant, in this case the Caribbean American, is left with no stable referent as he is forced to accept the fact that acceptability in America is contingent. If the markets want them as consumers, or as providers of some service, their identity remains provisional. Even amongst themselves, their 'certitude' slips in the face of exposure to new cultures and social values. Caught between certitude and negation, the migrant is forced to fall back on a sense of community, a group identity, as he/she negotiates his sense of being, of self through modes of resistance, tacit or obvious.

It follows that the migrants' identity is neither definite nor stable. If one adds the degrees of negation and resistance which naturally follow such interrogation/contestation by strangers, identity assumes complexity amidst fluidities. This in turn opens up possibilities as Chambers points out:

The...complex and constructed nature of our identities offers a key that opens us up to other possibilities: to recognise in our story other stories, to discover in the apparent completeness of the modern individual the incoherence, the estrangement, the gap opened up by the stranger, that subverts it and forces us to acknowledge the question: the stranger in ourselves. (*Migrancy, Culture, Identity* 24)

Since identities are neither simple nor fixed, it opens up possibilities for newer combinations and types of hyphenation amidst the migrants in America. Further, there are shared patterns of complexity in identity construction, amongst different groups. There

are shared stories or stories anchored to a common history. What an individual or group takes for granted may be subject to scrutiny and subverted or challenged by others till the bearer of that identity is no longer certain or has to rethink his/her/their position.

Stuart Hall, contends that cultural identities “are subject to the continuous ‘play’ of history, culture and power” (Rutherford 225). Identities cannot be formed or retrieved from the past without some form of ideological intervention. As far as Caribbean identities are concerned, he points to the deep points of difference, “the ruptures and discontinuities,” which define its uniqueness. When Caribbean migrant identities in the U.S.A. are subjected to challenges and interrogations, it further complicates their already complex and hybrid identities.

This chapter examines the following contentions:

First, the problem of gendered identity amongst Caribbean Americans is a key factor in identity assertions amongst Caribbean American women. Their identity is at stake among Black and White Americans. The present chapter will try to locate such problems of gendered identity and how they foster resilience in the minds of Caribbean Americans. The Caribbean Americans’ strong racial identity and unwillingness to give into pressures from the other Americans generates in them a strong resilience as far as sense of community is concerned.

Second, rejection and discriminatory experiences are somehow internalized in a way resulting in sometimes adverse mental health and at times a strong desire to reconstruct or reassert them. This study will examine the conditions set in the minds and acts of Caribbean Americans and how alienation from mainstream American society leads them to a position where they need to relocate themselves and thereby create their own definition of self.

Third, the chapter will try to examine how hybridity becomes the norm and identities are always in a state of becoming. The multiple subjectivities they fall back upon prove problematic at times. They manifest a double consciousness both willingly and unwillingly. There appears to be a lack of moorings in Caribbean Americans. Even if they try to settle down and assimilate with mainstream American society, their accents and then their skin colour points to their migrant status and lays them open to discrimination. Their

voluntary migration to America in search of job opportunities, education, and higher standards of living finally takes them away from their original Caribbean lives and culture towards a position which is not completely American. While they expect some discrimination on the grounds of race and colour in America, they are forced to acknowledge that discrimination can be experienced even amongst the coloured people. For instance, it is not just racism from the Whites but ill feeling from the African Americans and earlier migrants which complicates matters and leads to stress at different levels.

This leads to the fourth contention regarding their transnational status. Their mutant identities, groping with the new place and status force them to accept a transnational status and identity. With displacement there are displaced identities or sense of being. While a number of Caribbean migrants do not wish to reconnect with their past roots/ties, a majority of them find that they cannot sever ties with their erstwhile homeland through family compulsions, cultural ties as well as political pressures including those of documentation and acceptance in the new land.

There is also the question of collective identity where the migrants find protection in a sense of community. While this is not significant as all migrants continue to negotiate between assimilation with the mainstream culture and assertion of their own cultural identities, in the Caribbean Americans the ties appear to be stronger because of the proximity to their erstwhile homelands and culture. The hostility from other Americans of colour is another reason for the Caribbean migrants falling back on their own culture and ties to the erstwhile homeland. This is seen in some of the novels, where characters find solace in clinging to their Caribbean identity.

The migrants seek to redefine and renegotiate their identity. They in their own ways try to employ several techniques to reassert themselves in America. Stuart Hall points out that, “an essential Caribbean identity cannot be named because of the diverse cultures that meet in Caribbean spaces making the Caribbean a hybridized state” (Hall 58). This extends their trouble in finding a sense of being and identity in America. Due to their own hybridized culture, their identity assertion is fraught with problems. As such, every Caribbean American migrant faces the anxiety of identity and identification. They are both and none.

In “Cultural Identity and Diaspora,” Hall brings up a new concept of diaspora where the migrant does not necessarily return to his/her original homeland. Rather Hall talks about a diasporic experience where the migrant accepts the hybridized identity and culture. To him, America is a kind of ‘New World,’ welcoming and containing diversity as more and more people migrate to it. It follows that hybridity is a part of that diversity in America. Hall is of the opinion that “diaspora does not refer...to those scattered tribes whose identity can only be secured in relation to some sacred homeland to which they must at all cost return” (401). In fact, the presence of the Caribbean Americans in America, irrespective of their return or connection to the erstwhile homeland, upholds them as the Caribbean Diaspora. Moreover, with the intervention of mass media and commercialism, it is seen that it is the Caribbean Diaspora, often the Caribbean Americans, who tell the world about Caribbean culture.

Works of fiction by Caribbean American Writers, Julia Alvarez, Elizabeth Nunez and Naomi Jackson will be used in this chapter to examine issues of identity, race and gender in migrant narratives. The struggles that the individual characters and the racial groups face, in the process of trying to start a new life in a new place are often perceived through the lens of gender, race and cultural identity. What is interesting beyond the impressions forced on the Caribbean migrants in America, is the space they allow themselves vis a vis the White Americans and African Americans as they attempt to carve an identity of their own. The fictional works, on which the arguments are framed, are as follows- Julia Alvarez’s *How the Garcia Girls’ Lost their Accents* (2000), and *In the Name of Salome* (2010), Elizabeth Nunez’s *Boundaries* (2011) and Naomi Jackson’s *The Star Side of Bird Hill* (2015).

1

Julia Alvarez in her narration uses diasporic strokes to uncover the aspects of the dominant discourse of migration through her characters and their marginal position. She addresses the problems of migrants in America in her fiction:

Alvarez’s writing exposes her plight of identity caught between assimilation into US mainstream culture and contestation of the very mechanisms of assimilation into mainstream culture. (Lucia M. Suarez “Julia Alvarez and the Anxiety of Latina Representation” 117)

Her writing deals in depth with the issues of migrant identity and their contest in America. The challenges of assimilation in the distant land with constant urge either to improve their positions or at least have a stable home or income amongst the Whites poses a big problem for them.

Julia Alvarez's *How the Garcia Girls Lost their Accents* narrates the story of the Garcia family's flight from the Dominican Republic to New York, as they sought to escape from the cruel regime of Trujillo. Belonging to a well-to-do family, and then fleeing away from their own land is in itself a big act of shame. But with their four daughters, the Garcias tried to live a new life in America which is hostile towards the Blacks, especially Caribbeans, who were considered weaker than the African Americans. The family faced numerous problems in assimilating in America after their migration from the Dominican Republic. The narrative deals basically with the hardships involved in migration leading to displaced and confused identities. The family's collective response to life as immigrants is the central focus of Alvarez's novel. It deals with the narrative of each daughter and each of them has a story to offer regarding their assimilation on American soil.

All four Garcia sisters, Carla, Sandra, Yolanda and Sofia, were asked by Carlos, their father to correct their accents so that they could fit into American society. He felt that if they speak and behave like the Americans it will to some extent help their stay in America. Initially, the Garcia Girls were praying to go back to the Dominican Republic, and America was totally an idealized place for them where settling forever was impossible. After a happy and protected childhood in the Caribbean, the sudden exposure to the cruelty of American life proves traumatic for all the four sisters. But gradually they transform themselves into the American ways of life and then dread the idea of returning even for a while. Some of the early hardships are documented by one of the sisters as she points to some of the oddities they had to put up with:

[W]e sisters wailed and paled, whining to go home. We didn't feel we had the best the United States had to offer. We had only second-hand stuff, rental houses in one red-neck Catholic neighbourhood after another....Cooped up in those little...houses, the rules were as strict as for Island girls but there was no island to make up the difference. (*Garcia Girls* 107)

The change in status and location is glaring to the girls as they have to make adjustments

in the U.S.A. and use second hand goods. The places of residence in red-neck areas must have added to their culture shock as there is little claim to finesse in these people. Living in such neighbourhoods, the parents had to be extra vigilant over their children, especially the girls who in turn felt the control like the old days without anything to make up for it. Life in America was not easy for them and they started to search for the “right kind of Americans” everywhere (108).

But with time, too much of Americanization also affected them adversely. They “began to develop a taste for the American teenage good life, and soon, Island was old hat” (ibid):

[W]e might be fish out of water, but at least we had escaped the horns of our dilemma to a silver lining as Mami might say....We began to develop a taste for the American teenage good life, and soon, Island was old hat, man...By the end of a couple of years away from home, we had more than adjusted. (109)

Being driven by the American way of life, the Garcia girls were gradually adjusting to its norms. But this sort of Americanization only worsened their character. Carlos and Laura were worried whether they were losing their daughters to the American way of life.

After Carlos had garnered some money he had an obvious decision of sending his daughters back to the Dominican Republic so that they would not lose touch with the ‘*la familia*’. Their intention as parents was actually to get their daughters married to Dominican boys so that the girls would not marry an American and later think of the Caribbean as a place only to visit to get a suntan. Keeping such facts in mind Carlos and Laura had decided to send their daughters to the homeland during summer breaks which was quite loathsome to the daughters. While the girls had adjusted to life in America their parents had second thoughts about that very fact.

Sofia got addicted to marijuana and was taken out of her boarding school and then sent to the Dominican Republic for a year. Carla was teased by her school-mates for being Black, added to which she is taken advantage of by a White child molester, a taxi driver. Carla’s experiences add to her trauma and continue to haunt her sleep as well as other moments:

Their faces did not fade as fast from Carla's life. They trespassed in her dreams and in her waking moments. Sometimes when she woke in the dark, they were perched at the foot of her bed, a grim chorus of urchin faces, boys without bodies, chanting without words, 'Go back! Go back!' (165)

Carla internalized the fear and it had a deep impact on her which even affected her sleep. Unknown faces shout at her in her dream and make her conscious of her racial status. Her migrant status is time and again tested thereby making her life all the more troublesome in America.

This image of the boys shouting at her to go back in her dreams and in reality breaks her as an individual. Carla, after facing such a situation could understand and relate her problem with that of her sisters:

Carla would close her eyes and wish them gone. In that dark she created by keeping her eyes shut, she would pray, beginning with the names of her own sisters, for all those she wanted God to especially care for, here and back home. The seemingly endless list of familiar names would coax her back to sleep with a feeling of safety, of a world still peopled by those who loved her. (ibid)

Her identity at school, the boys repeatedly taunting her affects Carla to the core. It disturbs her sleep, as she dreams of being assaulted by them. This gendered and racial alienation affected Carla deeply. Apart from these, she was also ashamed of her parents' looks and identity like her own body. Her immigrant father's look and accent, and her mother's inability to drive a car are a few trivialities which continued to bother her.

On the other hand, Sandra witnessed a lady kissing her father while they were in a Spanish restaurant. Sandra failed to understand the complexity of the situation and how her father agreed to such an act. All these facts show how much one has to pay to assimilate on American soil. The family's struggle to assimilate with American culture tears their life apart. When young, they were sent against their will to the Dominican Republic during the summers because of the unbearable heat. However, after they had grown up, going back to their roots offered them scope to find out about their past heritage.

Yolanda's pain as a young migrant in America can be clearly understood when she

speaks out:

For hundredth time, I cursed my immigrant origins. If only I too had been born in Connecticut or Virginia, I too would understand the jokes everyone was making... I too would have suntanned parents who took me skiing in Colorado over Christmas break, and I would say things like 'no shit,' without feeling like I was imitating someone else. (95)

The discrimination that Yolanda and those like her faced alienated her from the rest. Due to their immigrant status, they were unable to feel and enjoy the small and silly pleasures of American life. They were treated as outsiders unable to understand or appreciate American values.

They were trying to relate themselves to everything American, necessary and unnecessary, good and bad. During such sad and difficult moments, when these girls felt too lonely and were victims of migration and subordination in America, they cry in pain at night, in isolation. On one such occasion, Yolanda says:

I would never find someone who would understand my peculiar mix of... Hispanic and American styles. Had I been raised with the traditions of stuffed animals, I would have hugged my bear or stuffed dog or rabbit... Instead, I...opened my drawer and took out the crucifix....This large crucifix had been a "security blanket"...after coming to this country. (100)

Though this is Yolanda airing her thoughts, this could have been any of her sisters or even any Caribbean American migrant who has no one but God to rely upon.

In this new country not only the Garcia daughters, even their mother Laura wanted to create a place for herself by spending time on some invention of hers. Whereas, her daughters were least interested in doing anything of that kind and resented her spending time on such things:

[T]hey were trying to fit in America among Americans; they needed help figuring out who they were, why the Irish kids whose grandparents had been micks were calling them spics. Why had they come to this country in the first place? Important...things...their own mother...didn't have a second to help them puzzle

any of this out. (138)

America proves to be a puzzle for them as they are unable to solve the issues of identity and assimilation. They realize as all migrants do that, it was of no use trying to compete with the Americans.

After much struggle, they could at least somewhat assimilate into American society. They understood, though only through hardships that “It is a difficult place, this country, before you get used to it. You have to not take things personal” (170). Despite their mixed feelings towards life in America they were forced to accept their hybrid status and identity. The discrimination they face amidst uncertainties of identity makes them realize that their hyphenation is not useless or subordinate to other people of migrant origin in America. They just have to convince themselves that other people from other places were in America before them and had put down roots so to say.

Alvarez’s novel speaks for and to all the voiceless and suppressed Caribbean American women and girls who find themselves in similar situations. Her characters can be taken to represent migrant in America. She identifies and articulates the predicament of individuals as well as communities whose voices can never be heard or acted upon.

2

Alvarez’s *In the Name of Salome`* deals with the story of two characters, Salome` Urena, the Dominican national poet and her Cuban raised daughter, Salome` Camila Henriquez Urena, a Professor in New York. Somewhat biographical in nature, *In the Name of Salome`* shows the rebellious and revolutionary Salome` Urena. The novel centres on the theme of love for one’s country (fatherland) and one’s family (*paterfamilias*).

Camila’s father, Pancho Henriquez was too much politically involved and always had to remain hidden and away from home most of the time. It is then Salome`, realized the worth of the land and that of the family. Instead of wasting her tears just like that, she recalls what her father said to her as a child, “Remember, don’t waste them. Tears are the ink of a poet” (*Salome* 24) and it is after that Salome started painting her grief in the canvas of poetry. Very soon Salome started writing poems, mostly political and grew popular amongst the Dominican audience.

Initially, she chose to remain anonymous, but it did not last long, and finally, her true identity is revealed and people accepted her wholeheartedly. Salome gave lessons to the nearby ladies in open schools by encouraging them in many ways inspite of being physically weak to handle loads of her nation and its people. Till her last breath, she wrote and fought for the country in all possible ways. This very spirit was there in Camila since she could feel like her mother. At one instance, when she was still young, she said:

I think of Cuba and Puerto Rico about to fight for their independence, and of the United States just beginning to fight for the independence of its black people, and then I think of my own patria willingly giving up its independence to become a colony again...What is this notion of a country that will make so many people die for its freedom? (25)

Salome`'s pain for the land, and her concern for her people are unfathomable. Her devotion for the people and the nation made her overlook her own family to some extent. She thinks as a nation, not as an individual. On the other hand, Camila in New York triesto teach her students her mother`s poems and the revolutionary zeal embedded in it for the Dominican Republic. She wants her students and the American readers to know about her mother Salome, the Dominican Republic`s national poet, who with a poetic zeal and revolutionary fervour changed the dormant scenario of the Dominican Republic. By the age of thirty, Salome had completed writing most of her poems and died of tuberculosis leaving the legacy of her fight for freedom to her daughter.

Camila who took after her mother was able to recount her mother`s experience and her role in the struggle for their land in front of her American students. She realizes later that now her work is over in New York as she is about to retire and “it is time nowto go back and be a part of what my mother started” (35). Camila wants to become Salome` Urena whose bold poetry once stirred the people of the Dominican Republic as she became her political muse.

Camila wants to create an identity for herself and her mother by narrating the latter`s story. “She has been afraid she will sound foolish if she explains how just once before her life is over, she would like to give herself completely to something—yes, like her mother” (7). She associates her identity with that of her mother. The pain, the struggle, in the Dominican Republic or Cuba in the later part of her life forced her to act for her

people. The lessons Salome gave to the women of Cuba, or the role played by Camila in the university and later musing upon her mother's thoughts or her works, Camila was thereby creating two identities merged into one. She knew that the Americans were not interested in the stories of Salome or any other heroes or heroines of minor countries until a movie is made on their lives. Camila feels a connection with her mother's instincts. The joy that Salome had when her poems were published anonymously in the name of Herminia and praised without the knowledge of the Dominicans, and her happiness and pride knew no bounds.

Salome realized quite early in life the need to create a space for her people, the Dominicans or the Cubans or at large the Caribbeans. She converted herself, the young girl's urge to a mission to tell the stories of the people who have passed on to her. Camila, after her mother whose name she always takes after the Gods, feels it is her duty to live for her people. Her story revolves around the story of her country and its people. The way in which Julia Alvarez narrates the story in no way leaves the reader with the story of a family or a girl and her mother. The novel only surrounds the reader with one Caribbean American girl and her nation and its people. Salome or Camila, the mother-daughter duo stresses their lives with the tensions of their 'la patria', their nation. Camila's childhood was shadowed with bouts of sickness against a background of political strife. Narratives of wars, perplexed governments marked as Red and Blue, Trujillo's rule, etc. were things she had heard as a child. Also, the stories of hiding in the dark hole underneath their house during the war were another stark reality she had to face as a child. For a girl of such tender age and witnessing and discussing such dark facts made her grow faster than her age demanded.

Camila after a certain point in her life has stopped using her mother's name, she feels she is yet to earn that honour. Camila realized that her people knew her mother's worth and the devotion of Salome towards her people and the nation. But this is something which should be brought forward to this world.

Salome was one such young woman who felt that she was born with a purpose, to articulate her thoughts and feelings and connect with the people:

I dreamed of setting us free. My shield was my paper, and my swords were the words my father was teaching me to wield...I was born poeta. The other things

were chance. But if you don't do what you're born to do, it destroys you. (50-52)

She recalls words from her father as a young girl who inspired her to write poetry. He advised her to voice her feelings, what everyone else cannot do, or does not have the talent to say, a poet do that. It is from then Salome started being bolder with her poems. Despite her father's fear of her being too assertive and her mother's encouragement (with her hidden identity as Herminia, and she being unaware of it), Salome soared higher. But very soon to be revealed, Herminia one day signed her script as Salome Urena and thus came to light the long hidden muse of 'la patria,' that is, the nation:

The work of Salome alias Herminia to the public and her family was a ray of hope,

EACH TIME THERE WAS a poem by Herminia in the paper, Mama` would close the front shutters of the house and read it in a whisper to the rest of us. She was delighted with the brave Herminia. I felt guilty keeping the secret from her, but I knew if I told her, all her joys would turn to worry.... (62)

Herminia, the poet was considered a warrior fighting with her pen encouraging the people of her nation to come up against the injustices:

"This Herminia is a warrior," my aunt said proudly. "In fact, my theory is that Herminia is really a man, hiding behind a woman's skirt." (63)

Politics within poetry triggered the Dominicans and inspired them to fight for their rights. By teaching the nearby people in the institution in the Dominican Republic she taught them the realities of life, which Camila too later in her life decides to do.

But Camila's identity was not restricted to herself. Even after her struggle on American soil and finally moving out after her superannuation, it left her with a feeling of having left many things undone:

Meanwhile...all the important things she was promised that have not yet happened: a great love, a settled home, a free country. I have not been back since the massacre," she explains. The slaughter of Haitians had disturbed her profoundly. What was it Trujillo finally paid for the twenty thousand dead, twenty pesos a

head? (79)

She was not able to enjoy her stay over there in the respectable post that she held at Vassar in the United States. Despite everything she has, she feels “*La patria still in chains.....The tears I’ve shed for her have never dried.....*” (80). When invited to speak on her mother in the institution later formed after her mother, Camila’s voice breaks in hidden guilt and tension. She feels all her mother’s or her family’s effort went in vain since then and even now. Their nation is in shambles and at this moment after her return, she cannot celebrate Salome’s work.

The later part of her own life was engrossed only in the affairs of the university whereas her parents and the rest of the family were involved in Haitian freedom. She was reminded of the fact that before his death, her father said to her to continue the struggle he was once a part of, “I leave you my flute as well as my trumpet” (101). Camila realized of late that:

The last thing our country needed was more poems. We needed schools. We needed to bring up a generation of young who would think in new ways and stop the cycle of suffering on our island. (187)

She desires the need for a set of educated mass in the Caribbean, a generation only whose alertness can discontinue the dictator’s regime in Haiti. Otherwise, days are ahead when the American will be ruling them instead of the Spanish governor. Camila lives with all these thoughts throughout her lifetime. There are phrases rolling in her head from her mother’s poems like, “*Duty is the highest virtue. The best lives involve surrender. Whoever gives himself to others lives among the doves*” (236). Her innervoice speaks to her to be like her mother, Salome. Though she denies at times using the name of Salome which is also a part of her name, Salome` Camila Heriquez Urena, it is only because she feels she is yet to reach her mother’s level. Camila’s bond with the nation was something she inherited from her mother, whose deep love for her own motherland was known to her people.

Finally, when she decides to go back to Cuba, Camila discovers that she is denied the pension. But she understands that it is still much better than living in America. Teaching literature to her people everywhere weighs much higher than a meagre sum of

money. Camila wants to continue with the institution, where her mother dreams to educate her people. She spends the last years of her life in Cuba and joins in the revolutionary struggle in the hope of living up to the name her mother entrusted to her. She also regrets at some point that she has no children to carry her musings forward as she was to her mother. Her nieces are of some hope to her. As such she is taking the whole of Cuba in her arms and passing it on.

After she migrated to the United States, it is from then she realized that pursuing her dreams and being amongst the Whites would not suffice her any more. She feels it is her duty to speak for the motherland. Alvarez's narrative as such challenges the national boundaries. Be it the Caribbean or America, the migrant can grow himself or herself fully in any space, region or situation. Their being uprooted would not bar them from playing different roles or assuming different identities. They move in and out of the boundaries emotionally and mentally. Both the lands, past and present offer them several facets of life. Belonging and not belonging, and alternating between homes gives them enough psychological space to live at the same time in both places. A geographical barrier does not restrict them in any way. But it is also not necessary for the migrant to always travel back to his or her homeland; a final return might not always be possible or wanted. Home now might not mean a place of original belonging. Their identities in the process are restored and reframed.

3

Naomi Jackson's novel *The Star Side of Bird Hill* narrates the story of a migrant mother, Avril and her two daughters, Dionne and Phaedra—sixteen and ten years old respectively and settled in Brooklyn, New York—when the novel begins. The novel is placed somewhere in 1989 when Avril decides to send her two daughters from Brooklyn to Barbados. Avril works as a nurse with the AIDS patients in America. She has to singlehandedly look after her daughters and herself in Brooklyn, which was in fact a tough challenge for her. Errol Rose, her husband only makes his appearance after she sends her daughters to live with their maternal grandmother, Hyacinth in Barbados. She could no longer provide a decent life for her daughters. Initially, she sends them for the summers in Barbados but it lengthens with time and then there is the news of Avril's death. And it is after her death that Errol comes to claim his daughters and take them with him to Miami where he has another family.

The novel basically revolves around Dionne and Phaedra and how they get themselves into the small community of Bird Hill on the island of Barbados, the way they accepted and rejected the same. The two sisters show two opposite views of the island culture. Where Dionne in no way wants to come out of the Brooklyn culture and the lifestyle, on the other hand, Phaedra was trying to mingle herself with the Caribbean life and the community. The two daughters' going back to their origins was in a way the different viewpoints in Avril's life. The acceptance and rejection of the same, one's identification with the American ways and the other's with the Caribbean highlights the problems of identification with a culture. The underlying contest that goes on throughout the novel reflects the dilemma faced by the girls especially Dionne.

They faced the stark reality of discriminatory experiences in Brooklyn. Nevertheless, to Dionne, Barbados was inferior in all aspects from America. But Phaedra had a different opinion altogether. She liked and enjoyed her stay in Barbados and could correlate with the atmosphere considering it as her mother's place.

Dionne was in no way convinced to come to Barbados even for a short while. It was always understood as sort of a punishment by her mother. The life of New York though tough was acceptable for her. But Barbados, she feels has only darker memories associated with her family:

For Dionne, Barbados was at best an inconvenience. As far as she was concerned, being born in Barbados had never benefited her in any particular way. She did know that Barbados was the one thing that her crazy mother and absent father had in common...for Dionne, Barbados was at the root of what she thought was wrong with her family. (*Star Side* 48)

Dionne always wanted for her a free life full of glamour and free from her mother's and sister's needs. Not that Barbados did allow her any freedom, but the freedom she sought could only be found in Brooklyn or any other part of America.

Dionne feels that there is little occasion to dress up while staying with her grandmother. The opportunities, glamour, freedom like the one she wishes could be found only in America. For her it is a natural transition from adolescence to young adulthood. In America, she thinks that one could achieve anything one wanted through

training and hard work. She does not consider the hardships one has to overcome to achieve something in life. She appears to have fallen prey to the American Dream of success.

As such, Dionne does not want to continue being like her grandmother or grandfather and simply continue life on Barbados:

Well, it's not like in the States, where you just decide what you're going to be and then you go to school and become that thing. Here on the hill, who you are is who your people have been. I was born the same day my grandfather died. Everyone said that was a sign I was coming back as him. (56)

What her grandmother tells her is about roots and staying rooted to a place, a culture and a way of life. There is no talk of upward or lateral mobility elsewhere. Staying connected is about the belief in your people, in yourself and life as it appears in the present. The rural idea of peace and stability is what they value against the volatile nature of urban life in the U.S.A.

On top of that Dionne hates the weather of Barbados, the cool and damp mornings, the terrible heat followed by rains in the afternoon that bars them from going outside, altogether made her life awful in Barbados. Along with that, the fierce sun had darkened her all the more. Still Dionne wants to keep her New York self, alive:

Dionne Braithwaite was two weeks fresh from Brooklyn and Barbados's fierce sun had already transformed her skin from its New York shade of caramel to brick red. (2)

Barbados was not only remote from New York but out of tune with Dionne's expectations. The climate was harsh and her vanity was sorely affected as her complexion darkened. For example, she finds that even the foundation cream she had brought with her no longer suited her darkening complexion.

She considers herself above the children of her age in Barbados and make-up was one defiant mode of stating her difference. Dionne hates in all possible ways the atmosphere, climatic conditions, people and almost everything about Barbados. She could only identify herself with the American ways of life howsoever difficult they were. She

prefers the chaos of New York to the monotony of life in Bird Hill. She was not even ready to leave New York for the summers. That is the only life she knew and is not ready to adjust to the slower pace of life in Barbados.

When lectured on the importance of the bonding with the family by Hyacinth and how much she too should be a part of the Caribbean women's tradition, continuing the chain of being, Dionne was disgusted all the more. The practicality of life that she had faced in America hardened her and she could only think realistically:

Family? Where was family when my mother was lying in her bed...? I was the one who bathed her... cleaned the house and made sure Phaedra went to school...did the shopping and went out every day pretending like everything was normal... it was my own damn self that I had to depend on. I didn't see anybody called family coming to help me then. (195)

The realities of life had hardened her and there had been no community or family helping her in times of need. She could draw upon or rely on nobody and it had left her unimpressed with all the talk about family and community in the Caribbean.

Dionne could in no way directly connect herself with the Caribbean tradition or its people. Despite Hyacinth's efforts to convince her granddaughter about the importance of the sacrifices they made, the troubles they faced in their place, Dionne is adamant to return to New York given a chance. But after the news of Avril's sudden death, which was considered a suicide, Dionne's life is shattered. Barbados could still then be not her place of future domicile. On the sudden arrival of her father and with air tickets, she was ready to part with Barbados and Hyacinth. With few doubts in mind about her father, Errol Rose, she was ready to go to Miami with him. She imagines that a life away from Barbados, which she considered 'backward,' would be great.

Dionne is clueless about what to do with life after Avril's death. It was hard enough to march forward without her mother's physical presence. But shockingly again after her mother's death, when they got to know about Errol's accident while running from police because he was accused of charges of exploiting minors, Dionne's hope to free herself from Barbados broke down. It was only then that she realized that she did not have a safer place than Barbados for her, that too, Hyacinth's house. Barbados was always for her the

last option to survive in a safe manner. Given a chance she would have flung herself on New York or Miami or any other place where her wishes and desires could have been fulfilled.

Phaedra on the other hand was surprised by the new life in Barbados. Her transnational status confines more to Barbados once removed from Brooklyn. The discriminatory experiences that Brooklyn offered with the tight apartments led her to a constricted childhood. As such when they are forced to go to Barbados to spend the summer with their grandmother, Hyacinth and to know its culture and heritage, Phaedra accepts it without any problem. The freshness, openness awakens in her a love for Barbados. She tries to feel her mother's presence in her childhood, living the rustic life:

The shape of her new life surprised her, and even though it had only been a little while, Phaedra already felt herself becoming a girl from Bird Hill; she could feel herself shedding the armor she needed in Brooklyn. (34)

In Barbados she can relive some of her mother's early days. She could easily get connected and accept everything in Barbados. The freedom she sought was there in the air for her.

With a natural beauty of its own Barbados appealed to her: Barbados seemed better than Brooklyn with its cities and buildings, where:

[Y]ou were more likely to find a syringe than a seashell on the beach at Coney Island... It was hard to explain, but she had a feeling... that she'd never felt before in Brooklyn, not that she owned these things, but that she was somehow part of them (8).

Phaedra could bond with the land. The rejection and fear of life, that they had in Brooklyn were absent in Barbados, where she could breathe free air.

She notices little things like the names of the houses: in Brooklyn their apartment house was numbered as, "261", whereas in Barbados in her grandmother's house just above the front steps it was written, "Why worry?" These very small facts touched Phaedra with a positivity for which she could connect herself with Hyacinth, her house and everything about Barbados. To Phaedra, "Everything in Hyacinth's house had been touched by those she loved, and so it was Phaedra's and Dionne's in a way that their

apartment in Brooklyn never would be” (6). She has no issues about life in Barbados and unconsciously, does her best to capture the spirit of its culture.

Phaedra always kept in mind her mother’s lessons for life to safeguard her in any condition and face their fate. She, from her very young age, tried to decipher her mother’s troubles and how she fought with her life to raise them and also herself. After Avril’s death, she learns to get accustomed to the life of Barbados and accepts it in its totality.

Avril, the absent present mother plays a crucial role in defining the roles of her daughters. Jackson draws this character of the mother figure who despite her absence gives voice to both her daughters. Both before and after her death, which occurs in the novel, she directs the lives of her daughters. Dionne and Phaedra are like two sides of the same coin. They act like the two different views of Avril who was both attached and detached from Barbados and New York. She explains to her daughters why she left Barbados and settled in New York. Apart from a ‘clannish’ attitude, the island people refused to look ahead or accept the advances in medical science:

Nineteen girls and one boy had died before the hill folks abandoned their suspicion of the world in general and doctors in particular, to seek help from “outside people.” This was just one of the stories that Dionne and Phaedra’s mother summoned as evidence for why she left the hill the first chance she got. “They’re clannish.” (4)

Her motherly instinct forced her to leave Barbados and migrate to America for better opportunities and safeguard her daughters.

Avril initially worked as a teacher in Barbados, later in Brooklyn she served as a nurse looking after the AIDS patients. Encountering many deaths in a day in the course of her work, made Avril suffer from depression and anxiety issues. Unable to provide her girls with a better life affected her mental health and finally forced her to send them to her mother in Barbados. Though it was temporary, her deteriorating health was too much for her to bear and she commits suicide, leaving her daughters to Hyacinth.

From Brooklyn, Avril could only think of Barbados in terms of disdain: “Barbados was bimbshire, a jewel that Bajans turned over in their minds” (40). That however, does not

stop her from wishing to stay connected with her birthplace and telling her daughters about it before sending them over to spend time with their grandmother. Her connection is neither one of nostalgia nor of sentiment. Avril tells Dionne and Phaedra that:

[N]o matter what she felt about Bird Hill, it was important that they spend time with their grandmother, and get to know the place without which they would still be specks in God's eye. (ibid)

She could no longer connect to Bird Hill, Barbados and relate herself to the place. She never failed to warn her daughters about other dangers like the sugarcane fields in Barbados which were like the subway platforms of New York, which looks enticing but were dangerous. Living in America was tough, but it gave them very many opportunities which she felt Barbados could not.

When she first went to Brooklyn she tried to provide her daughters with all comforts she could afford. She was then a vibrant woman writing children's books for Dionne and Phaedra. She tried taking them to every possible free event she could, tried celebrating their birthdays. Hyacinth still recalls after Avril's death how twenty years ago she was full of hope for a new life in the city. But the stark reality of life could not allow her to enjoy beautiful moments for long:

Without the daily dramas of either the hospital or the hill, Avril was floating, anchorless. A kind of freedom she'd always wanted, but didn't know what to do with when it came. (47)

With these thoughts burdening her, finally Avril committed suicide and was found after ten days of being kept in the morgue without anybody to claim her dead body. To Hyacinth who "couldn't imagine anyone dying in Bird Hill so thoroughly alone", the pain of Avril's death was doubled by the fact of her dying unknown, alone (134). Until death, Avril could not wholly accept the Barbadian identity. Though American life was filled with struggle, she could not trace back to the life she left once and forever. It is as if she forcefully tried to fit into the culture of Brooklyn and embrace its identity. However, the pace and the trauma prove too much for her physically and mentally.

Hyacinth, on the other hand, embraced Bird Hill wholeheartedly. She could never

think of leaving Barbados for any single reason, though she told Avril that if required she will go and look after her granddaughters in New York, which never happened. Hyacinth's feelings about America were never tested first hand but she continued with her reservations:

One of the things that confirmed Hyacinth's suspicion that America was an evil, lonely place was that people were islands unto themselves. And so when Avril drifted away, there was no friend or neighbour or pastor or coworker to reach out to and ask after her child. It was as if Avril had disappeared down a rabbit hole. (131)

Hyacinth considers Avril's life and death a waste. She is struck by the loneliness of life in a big city where a person is on his own. With a hard voice, she accepts her daughter's death. Behind her strong front, she is worried about Dionne and considers her view of life flawed like her mother's.

Hyacinth tries to make Dionne and Phaedra understand the realities of life against the past days of slavery, the "big ugly thing... constantly grabbing at your neck" to comfort them (283). She feels that they cannot afford to remain ignorant about its tragic past:

If you think this life...is hard...imagine those days. Nothing... like what you call your life now. Every day the children that you call your own, the husband...the wife...everything that you call your own, you knew it wasn't yours in truth. You knew that any tie to what you thought was yours could be broken just so. (ibid)

Dionne and Phaedra were all broken after Avril and then Errol's death. At least for Dionne, Errol would provide them with a furnished life like the one they held in Brooklyn. But one death after the other left them broken. It is then, that Hyacinth makes them aware of the past, the days of slavery when none of the slaves could take anything for granted or call anybody their own.

Dionne is left with no choice but to settle in Barbados, at least, for the time being. Despite her eagerness to leave the place, she has to choose Bird Hill because it is the only safe place for them at that moment. Hyacinth tries to pass on to her the knowledge

of the past, the strong line of women, her grandmother and great-grandmothers, and the line of women who suffered in Barbados. Like them, she would also heal in time. If they could bear those days of slavery, Dionne too can pass this. It's the same blood that runs through her veins. It is as if Dionne under her grandmother's tutelage is made aware of the fortitude and strength a woman can fall back upon whenever life presents uncomfortable challenges in one's path. Here, the desire for an American life and identity is not sustainable for the girls especially Dionne, for lack of financial support and social security. Barbados at least was home to earlier generations and for the time being it promises shelter and healing.

4

Elizabeth Nunez' *Boundaries* presents the dilemma of a Caribbean American, Anna, who is made painfully aware of her naturalized status when she tries to compete for a top post in a publishing house she had served for several years in New York. Anna had become an American citizen despite maintaining links with her parents in the Caribbean. Her plight brings up the status of the immigrants who continue to face discrimination, even after being awarded citizenship. She is made to face the situation by her friend Paula and realizes:

The immigrant has a duty to spare her family and friends news of failure. The immigrant must not disappoint. This is the bargain the immigrant makes for the freedom of anonymity, for the chance to remake herself, to wipe the slate clean, to begin anew and write new history in the fantasy land that is America. (*Boundaries* 19)

People back home in the Caribbean do not want to hear stories of failure from those who have gone to America. For them, the American Dream remains a possibility:

The family and friends of the immigrant do not want this dream shattered. Their hopes, the hopes of the community, rest on the immigrant's success. Like children believing in Santa Claus, they do not want to be told the dream is a lie. (ibid)

Anna is reminded of the efforts of fellow Caribbean Americans to maintain that fiction as they send back home barrels of goodies during Christmas to assure family and friends of their wellbeing.

Given such expectations, of migrant success in America, the person/s are caught in

their own dilemmas as they face discrimination in their lives:

The immigrant holds her tongue. She does not tell of the long hours she must work....She does not admit to loneliness....She does not say she cannot afford to buy for herself many of the things she puts in the barrel. The illusion is to be maintained. (20)

While Anna's situation is not so acute, the humiliation and injustice she has to face at work makes her disturbed and unhappy. Her best efforts are not appreciated and sidelined for someone else to gain prime space. When she finally tells her father about her situation, he advises her to look beyond the discrimination as the people born in the U.S.A. would always claim precedence over others. Her boyfriend Paul Bishop, a fellow Caribbean American and a successful surgeon, also tells her that they have to accept their hyphenated status.

Even as Anna has her own problems to handle, she has to persuade her aged mother who is suffering from breast cancer to come to the U.S.A. for surgery. They are helped by Paul Bishop, a surgeon and the son of her father's friend, who manages to convince her mother, Mrs. Sinclair, that she will receive good medical care in his hospital in New Jersey. Mrs. Sinclair has heard too many stories of racial discrimination in America and it takes some persuasion to convince her that Black and White doctors and nurses treat their patients in the same way. She is pleasantly surprised by the treatment she receives in the hospital under Paul Bishop's general supervision. It is during his care for her mother and afterwards that their friendship grows. While her mother's fears are allayed, Anna who has been working in her job for more than ten years has to face the gross reality of discrimination at the workplace.

Contrary to the views of Paul and her father, Anna continues to struggle with her feelings as a senior editor of a publishing firm. She has been promoting serious literary fiction but finds that because the writer is a Black woman, the art department with the backing of the chief editor wants to sell it with a sleazy cover against their wishes as if to suggest that coloured writers and their reading public are capable of nothing better. Anna knows that instead of stereotypical junk, "literary fiction is essential for advancing the culture, giving us hope" (40). When she is shown her place and told they knew better, Anna realizes that:

She has been disregarded, disrespected. They did not consult her. They made their decision with no consideration for her input. She should have been involved from the beginning. Now she is expected to accept the decision they have made for her, to be satisfied with Tanya's patronizing remark. (45)

Expertise or experience count for little in the face of blatant commercialism backed by chauvinism. She is disturbed by the books "brought out by publishers with their eyes on the bottom line of their ledgers" (47). As is to show her that she is not an American by birth, her colleagues, Black and White, go out of their way to tell her that they know what is best for the public.

Her friend Paula, a Caribbean American teacher, reminds her of their delicate position in America:

"You have to understand that while we may have passports, politicians are not talking about us when they talk about real Americans. We are not on their radar screen. Never forget that, Anna." (59)

As they argue their points, Anna is caught between Paula's pragmatism and her own perceptions which she feels are backed by common sense:

"America is a salad bowl," Paula says when Anna does not respond. "It's not a melting pot as the politicians want us to believe. A tomato is still a tomato in the salad bowl. And who'd want to melt anyhow? You'd lose your identity if you melt." (62)

Anna believes that if you lost your identity (as a person of Caribbean origin), "you'd become American" as she tells Paula (*ibid*). The question here, is whether they would let you or accept you completely as one of them.

As Anna bristles, about her status and identity Paula repeats:

"I don't doubt you know your business....[B]ut like I always say to you, we may have the passport, but we are hyphenated citizens. They know the terrain better than we ever possibly could." (91)

What Paula tries to convince her friend is that migrants continue to be seen as such even after years of domicile. Sometimes second-generation Americans of migrant origin still have to face that discrimination on the basis of their looks or strains of their parents' culture that they may carry. Moreover, Anna has to accept Paula's contention that unlike an ideal world, "in the real world, we are competitive; we crave power. We need others under our feet so we can stand tall above them" (94). It underlines what she had noted subconsciously without admitting outright that "Americans born here need to flex their muscles over immigrants. It makes them feel powerful" (ibid). If at one time it was the Whites who had done it, it had currently become the turn of the African Americans over the migrants.

Anna recalls her youthful days in the Caribbean when after returning home with an American degree, her credentials are undermined by the people in charge of colleges and schools. She is told that unless the degree was from Harvard or one of the Ivy League universities or from Howard University (for Blacks) they did not recognize other American universities. Anna is confused by the attitude of the Islanders who continued to harbour such an attitude despite independence from Colonial British rule. She learns that they still maintained the old system of rules and regulations introduced by the British. The lack of job opportunities drives her back to the U.S.A. to improve her credentials and work her way up the ladder in the publishing business.

When Anna's expected promotion is awarded to her junior newly appointed colleague, she is devastated at the injustice of it all. It is left to Paula to tell her friend that she should have been more prepared, that she was "not saying it's right, or it's fair. It's just the way things are" in America. The author, Nunez, makes Paula articulate the hard reality of the migrant situation, especially Caribbean Americans:

"I am on your side, but you insist on believing in all that stuff about assimilation. The ancestors of all Americans may have been born in another country—except, of course, the Native Americans—but they all suffer from collective amnesia. Well, assimilation is for the next generation, not for us." (147)

While migrants are seen struggling with a sense of identity amidst ties to their original culture, their attempts at assimilation are not appreciated till they appear to fulfill some need to make up the figures as consumers, soldiers or as backup for some mass movement against a foreign power. Inderpal Grewal in *Transnational America* mentions the

provisional acceptance that American markets accord to the migrants (8). They were provisionally recognized as national subjects to be accommodated by America's consumer culture (8). That being so, partial acceptance by a section of society deludes the migrants into a sense of security and stability which proves to be unstable, even fluid. In Paula's words, "the bridge between immigrants and Americans born in America is a wobbly one. You can fall off any time America wants to shake it" (92). Unless they were backed by a voting bank signifying political power, migrants counted for little when it came to securing higher positions at work.

Paula's exhortations and Anna's own experience notwithstanding, both try to make things better for others in the course of their work. Paula encourages difficult students to try and improve their performance and Anna tries her best to promote young Black writers who do not try to cater to market demands. She firmly believes that genuine and serious writing can still make an impact on the world. As she tells Paula:

If there is hope for the world...it is in our ability to see ourselves in others, in persons who do not look like us, do not talk like us, do not live like us, but who in every essential way are exactly like us. People who desire the same things all people want: above all to survive...to be happy. (94)

Her hard work and promotion of talented young writers is what she dreamt about and did, to make literary writing matter, till it lay crushed under the feet of insensitive colleagues intent on selling cheap thrills for the youth. In her efforts to promote Black literature, to show the world that good literary writing could still be produced, she had embraced at least the Blacks in America (African Americans, Caribbean Americans and possibly Africans). While a few writers appreciate her efforts, others serving the publishers are not interested in producing quality, only in money they can bring in. Anna is left mulling over her father's advice: "Enjoy your life, Anna. Don't set too much stock on your job. Enjoy life while you are still young" (105). With further advice from Paul, her boyfriend, she decides to accept what is available to her and make a good job of it: "I don't have to be the boss," she says, "Senior editor is good enough. I like editing books" (196). She accepts, as Paul tells her, that it is the price of the ticket, of the green card. Like him, she would accept her identity as hybrid, as Caribbean American.

The chapter shows that identity, especially for migrants and in this case Caribbean

Americans, cannot be taken for granted as a stable entity. Rather, it remains fluid and mutant, always in a state of becoming as individuals and communities are pushed to fall back on the past as they try to redefine their positions and affinities. The Caribbeans are hybrids by origin as their island cultures embrace multiple locations both geographic and cultural. That they are not allowed to forget their difference even as they seek to assimilate in mainstream American society and culture, is something they have to accept and fall back on a further hybridized Caribbean American identity or identities as the case may be.