CHAPTER SIX

HOME AND THE WORLD:
POLITICS OF FAMILIAL AND CLASS LOCATIONS

One way to picture the world is to treat it as an accumulation of families. (Manning 173)

As individuals we are all part of a bigger family—“Vasudeva Kutumbam.” According to George Santayana, the noted Spanish-American philosopher and writer, “family is one of nature’s masterpieces.” It is also a “place where people can relate to each other on the basis of love, finding solace from the hardships and pressures of work” (Bloodworth 112). The family, on the other hand, is also the site for cultural and generational conflicts particularly when linked with the idea of home—both sensory and spatial. For South Asians the concept of family and home also represents: “one’s inner spiritual self, one’s true identity” (Chatterjee 263). Family and home are also crucial sites for South Asian diasporans as it not only provides them an anchoring but also a space and outlet for creating “micro-histories” that challenge “the authority of established forms of macro-history” (Longley 213). It is in the transnational journeys of writers and characters that we are invited to consider what it means to be “at home” or to inhabit a particular location/space/place. Home then is not just a familiar or comforting space but it is a place where the diasporan finds a familial identity and security. Therefore in the diasporan space, according to R. Radhakrishnan (1994), a renegotiation and redefinition of “the very organicity of the family and the community, displaced by travel and relocation” is a must for a creative writer (223-224).

Adrienne Rich in her essay, “Blood, Bread, and Poetry” (1984), on the influence of a sexist and racist society on a writer/poet, suggested that every human being is situated in global/world society by the “facts of blood and bread” (171). Rich’s metaphors of “blood” and “bread” have been further used by Mary Ann Tolbert (1995) to describe “politics of location” that affirms and presents the complex
ties of "blood," representing one's familial links and "bread," representing one's economical and national location (331). As it is

[T]ogether the "facts of blood and bread" locate each of us socially and politically at any given moment in relation to our access to power, our relative freedom from oppressive treatment, and our assurance of our own human dignity, integrity, and worth. (Tolbert 331-332)

"Blood" and "Bread" here thus represent family and class locations of South Asian diaspora immigrants as they delineate interrelated experiences of social formation and economic authority in relation to Australia and South Asia.

However, an assessment of family relationships in diaspora is no easy task. There are no accepted measures of such interactions and negotiations within the space of familial location. A distinguishing feature of diaspora related to family is through involving of the temporal-historical dimension i.e. "its existence over at least two generations" or more (K. Butler 192). Individuals arriving in a new homeland become first-generation migrants. Their children, either migrating from back home or born in the new homeland, become second-generation immigrants, living in the land of their birth (see Manning 121) or spending major part of their childhood and growing up as the case may be. The narratives of the diaspora progress thus by combining "the individual migration experience with the collective history of group dispersal [family migration] and regenesis of community abroad" (K. Butler 192).

The original goal of the Australian immigration policy, as discussed in Chapter one, was the assimilation of migrants into Australia's predominantly Anglo-Celtic population as permanent settlers. Therefore, migrant selection (at both individual and familial level) was carefully managed to preserve the nation's ethnic and cultural homogeneity (see James 2001). By doing an analysis of the family and class, we can understand the nature of some of the conflicts and changes that have occurred in new homes in the diaspora. The very idea of a "diasporic family" with its ethnic, cultural and social diversity is to some extent perceived as a threat to the socio-cultural supremacy of the dominant white Australians. And on the question of what makes home or family, J. Macgregor Wise (2000) notes that

The marker's of home, however, are not simply inanimate objects (a place with stuff), but the presence, habits, and effects of spouses, children, parents, and companions. One can be at home simply in the presence of a significant other. What makes home-territories different
from other territories is on the one hand the living of the territory (a
temporalization of the space), and on the other their connection with
identity, or rather a process of identification, of articulation of affect.
Homes, we feel, are ours. (299; my italics)
The relationship between stages of migration and family life is an important one that
can be analysed only through the story of migration from the perspective of the family
i.e. effects on “spouses, children, parents, and companions” and further their changing
identities and roles. Sharmila Rudrappa (2002) notes that “the private space/home is
one of the most crucial anchors for the nonwhite immigrant family” and to
“negotiate” its way “through a sea” of “whiteness” (92) is a challenge for scholars of
diaspora study.

The family, as the primary unit of society, has been of great interest for
sociologists and anthropologists. They have been interested in the structure of the
family, and the norms, values and rules that govern it along with the roles played by
different members to achieve its complex equilibrium (see also Wilson 1985). An
important aspect of reading the consequent varied identities, in homeland and
hostland, is to understand the process of migration in the context of distribution of
familial and class identities in Australia i.e. families migrating across the seas and
thus breaking up and generating new families based on the same pattern as present in
the homeland but confronted with a new set of rules. Significantly, according to
Seaman (1996) the desire to make new connections given the sense of alienation from
home—or the “feeling of being at home in several countries, or cultures but not
completely at home in any of them” (53) often leads to the discovery of a new
community:

Our community of strangers—our experience of family with our global
nomads—is one of the large and often recognised paradoxes of this
heritage. (53)
The forming of a new community and family provides a sense of fixity to the
diasporan.

The family and class, although popular areas of discussion in South Asian
diaspora studies, have remained a fashionable topic only amongst the sociologists.
This chapter, however, is an exercise in literary imaginations rather than scientific or
sociological validation. Migration of families and carrying over of class structures as
presented in the works of South Asian diaspora writers in Australia is under scrutiny
here. The approach taken in this chapter is to emphasise the ways in which the family experience of migrating and integrating into Australia from the Indian subcontinent has affected the migrants' choices in life. I propose to explore here migration patterns of "the fictitious family" as presented by these writers. I also investigate how these contemporary writers of South Asian diaspora construct domesticity and class differences in their works. Ashcroft et al. (2002) note: "Since diaspora is also often the pre-condition for a particular class of ex-colonized people and often involves access to greater educational and economic opportunities, 'class' becomes an important issue in diaspora studies" (219). These diasporic texts invariably discuss the causes, processes, dilemmas, and effects of migration on the South Asian diasporic family and class order in Australia.

Kateryna O. Longley in her article "Little Histories" (1997) focusing on the genre of family history in Australian multicultural writing, observes that it "is making an important and not yet sufficiently recognised contribution to Australia's rapidly changing sense of its post-settlement social history" (213). Longley further notes that these family histories or narratives written from a migrant's point of view "are contributing in a special way to the breaking down of old boundaries which in Australia amounts to a revolution of re-imagining and remapping of Australian cultural identity, past and present" (213). In the context of the South Asian diaspora in Australia, family is also the site of narratives, as the "tales of the first generations" of "migrations remained mostly untold outside their families and communities until in the later years of the twentieth century when their descendants joined the third diaspora, travelled the world and started to write the histories of their forebears" (McLaren 36). These early pioneer South Asian migrants (particularly North Indian "Afghan" cameleers and Punjabi farmers) to Australia by establishing extensive family networks within the community thus limited their need for interaction with individuals from outside their community and resisted integration into the dominant Anglo-Australian society.

The South Asian diaspora writing in Australia uses the topos of early individual and family immigrant experience to narrate the tale of rooting in. In her story, "Navaranjini Takes Note of Signs and Visions" (1992), Yasmine Gooneratne interweaves the contemporary migration and process of settlement with the invented late nineteenth-century diaries which record the circumstances of migration of her
husband’s ancestor, grandfather Edward, from Sri Lanka to Australia. Navaranjani notes:

I began to read, with careful attention, the record my husband’s grandfather had left of his travels. A hundred years ago, I thought, this man made the same journey that we are making now. What can I learn from it? What can it teach me? (36)

According to Shirley Tucker (2003) “Gooneratne’s strategic use of the grandfather’s diary entries as a means to write hitherto missing immigrant narratives into dominant versions of Australian history questions the validity of cultural identities based purely on homeland and, indeed, history itself.”1 Young migrants often learn important social values from the adults in the family. By reading the diaries of her husband’s ancestor, Navaranjani is able to “piece together a story which becomes an important part of their own Australian history in the process” (Longley 221). South Asian diaspora narratives are thus also “genealogical” narratives, “where the lives of younger characters unfold alongside and in relation to the lives and memories of their parents and grandparents” (Gelder and Salzman 49).

Hanifa Deen, a third generation Australian, of Pakistani-Muslim ancestry, in “Curry, Crusades and Scripture” (1992) remembers how as a Muslim child growing up in Western Australia she was struck by the fact that there was no Muslim community around them during 1940s and 50s.

My sister and I were the only children and, of course, were outrageously spoilt by our many elderly “uncles,” most of whom had come to Australia in the 1890s, well before the White Australia policy days, leaving their families back in India, or Pakistan as it became in 1947. (139)

Five generations of the Deen family belong to Australia going back to both her grandfathers who came out from what is today Pakistan in the 1890s, before the White Australia Policy of the era closed the doors to new immigration. As noted in the introduction to this study, the first South Asian migrants to Australia were mostly men, “many of whom intended to stay for only a few years while saving or remitting as much money as possible to augment or restore a family’s fortunes at home” (Goldthorpe 195). Chain migration brought these kinsmen and fellow villagers together in ever larger residential and occupational clusters in Australia (see Ballard 1994). The “uncles” that Hanifa Dean refers to were the famous Afghans or “Ghans,”
who were not allowed, because of the White Australia Policy, to bring in their families to Australia. These populations became predominantly male, had many young adults, few children, and few old people. And to compensate for their loss they created extended family networks in Australia based on regional kinship. Patrick Manning (2005) notes that “once migrants reached the land of their destination, families formed in several ways. Many migrants—perhaps most—did not form new families but lived out their time as distant members of their home family. Others formed informal families, turning friends into ‘brothers’ and ‘aunts’ ” (121).

Hanifa Deen also became aware of social prejudices, authoritarian bias and other discriminatory practices against her community at a very early age. This had a huge impact on her family relations, as she didn’t know or hadn’t seen most of her relatives. She further notes that although there were some clear “disadvantages of growing up without a community of families, especially in terms of language maintenance” (139-140) there were some advantages as well, especially for girls:

> The social and religious pressures to conform to a strictly traditional way of life were absent. This meant that I could aspire to be anything I wanted, within the class and gender limitations of the period, of course. (140)

If the South Asian family at that time focused on schooling for the children, the children at that time were likely to be racially abused. Hanifa’s father acted as a home tutor and in his spare time not only taught the girls “reinterpretation of the heavily biased texts,” used in her school curriculum that were largely based on Christian mythology and Britain but also gave them Muslim religious education. It was because of the support of her father and his teachings that she was able to hold her “head high” at school and intermixed with other, particularly Jewish children, who were also persecuted as minorities. Education is important in the life of South Asian diasporan families living at the urban centres of western world not just for employment of adults but also for children to “undergo the socialization of the school as well as socialization of their family” (Manning 173).

In Mena Abdullah’s short story collection The Time of the Peacock (1965), despite their problems in this unsociable hinterland, the family is accustomed to the Australian soil and has established a “connection on their own terms” (Tucker 2003).
As noted in Chapter three, the garden in “Because of the Rusilla” is an example of their adaptation to Australian land:

The garden was a strange place and lovely. It was our mother’s place, Ama’s own place. Outside its lattice walls was the farmyard with its fowls and goats (Sulieman the rooster and Yasmin the nanny), and beyond that was Father’s place, the wool-sheds and the yards, and beyond that the hills with their changing faces and their Australianness. (12)

The garden is also the homeland (India) for the family. As the narrator notes in “The Time of the Peacock,” that her mother was

[... ] standing there, in her own garden, the one with the Indian flowers, her own little walled-in country. (2, my italics)

When physical movement to the original homeland is no longer a functional solution an individual as a result withdraws into the nostalgic distance of myth—his/her very “own little walled-in country.” Under these circumstances “family,” in more literal/domestic or community/clan sense, can “gain considerably in importance” (Bammer 94). As pioneer immigrants in a dominantly white country and in unfamiliar surroundings the migrants from the Indian subcontinent feel the need for “free spaces such as the home and family” where they can become South Asian again (Rudrappa 93). In Abdullah’s story “The Time of the Peacock,” everything is wonderful for the family, living on a farm, in New England, NSW, away from Australian population and away from India. In their loneliness, the family members act as a support group for each other.

When I was little everything was wonderful; the world was our farm and we were all loved. Rashida and Lal and I, Father and our mother, Ama: we loved one another and everything turned to good. (1)

Immigrant families come to Australia with many strengths, sometimes with an intact family structure that acts as security or support system for them in times of loneliness. These strengths can help to insulate children of immigrants from various negative influences in society, but they are not always sufficient to keep children on pathways to success over time. The children of the immigrant families must navigate the difficult process of acculturation and in this not only the family support but also the institutional guidance is necessary.

The aspiration to own luxury is not limited to the first generation and several second generation individuals also show the same propensity towards conspicuous
consumption. The narrator in Vijay Mishra’s “Dilkusha” (2004) recounts how at an evening party in Sydney, the primarily Indian guests arrived in designer wear and “began to talk, about cricket, about wealth, about cars, about riches, about flats, houses, children’s education: to be a doctor is a blessing but to be a dentist divine [. . . .]” (132). These diasporans attended Indian functions, looked for Indians with whom to associate, and sought friendship and company of other Indian-Australians. This is not because of their loneliness and isolation alone but also to maintain class or status quo by showing off their prosperity or success that helps the diasporans deal with the psychological challenges within the social milieu of Australia.

Children of immigrant families must confront the challenges, at a very early stage, of first understanding, and then negotiating their place in the Australian society often having to deal with racial and social prejudices as they struggle to create a new identity for themselves. In Mena Abdullah’s story “Grandfather Tiger,” Raj, a second generation Indian-Australian wants to return to India for the sake of his family, as he shamefacedly observes

“[. . . .] But what are we to do? I belong here. I am an Australian, but who will believe me? My skin, my face, my thinking contradicts me, and who will accept me—or my children? He looked at Joti.” (94-95)

However, at the end of the story, Joti, Raj’s daughter is sharing her lunch with an Anglo-Australian girl Dorothy.

“Thank you,” said Dorothy. “This tastes nice. Would you like one of my biscuits?”

“Thank you,” said Joti. They sat side by side and ate. [. . . .] (100)

And suddenly Joti remembers something her Grandfather had said:

“All men should be brothers,” Grandfather had said, “and they become brothers by sharing. They share what they have—small things, big things—then they are brothers.”

Joti grabbed Dorothy’s arm. “We have shared our food,” she shouted. “We are sisters, sisters.” (100)

This message of brotherhood/sisterhood that the two young schoolgirls get in Abdullah’s story is also the desired path for both Anglo-Australians and the new immigrants as it will result in a cohesive community of fellow Australians. This sharing helps in social integration, bonding and creating a sense of commitment
towards the Australian society. Writing in praise of Mena Abdullah’s stories about the immigrant family in Australian hinterland, Ronald Mc Cuaig (1965) observed, that

[... ] no Australian author has ever achieved the simple purity of this prose [...]. The view of an Australian bush community through the eyes of an Indian family has a kind of magic for the Australian reader and in most of the stories there is a moment, free from sentimentality, where the felicity of the writing causes a catch in the throat. (8)

Renuka Sharma in “Paternity” (1994) portrays three generations of a migrant family. Sharma writes that the grandfather, father and grandson, represent “so much radicalism in one family” that the grandson often wonders if he is “blindly following a dictum” (157). The grandfather settled in Australia as a sugarcane farmer almost sixty years ago. He is happy that all his children, from his two wives, are well settled with their families and have merged in the Australian society.

Often at festivals or weddings various combinations of family would gather and news of births, deaths and liaisons exchanged. (154) On meeting his children, the thoughts of the youngest son most trouble the father. This son, now a father of grown up children himself, was defiant from his childhood days. He ran away from home to escape the ire of his stepmother, who was particularly harsh on him. He studied abroad, became a pork-eating socialist and now doesn’t believe in Indian traditions. In contrast, the old man, who belonged to a Brahmin family, has, for the past sixty years, never forgot his role as a high priest for his small community living in Australia. To the grandson, the grandfather represents traditions of old country, while his father stands for modernity of the new homeland, but it is he, representing the University educated and totally integrated third generation of Indian-Australians, who disagrees “with their ideas on tradition and modernity” and wants to go “beyond” it as a transnational (157). He is interested in the “process of change” and understands that the new generation is more aware of Australian society and the system of government, and therefore can really bring a positive change and revolution in the South Asian diaspora (157). This view is very similar to Judah Waten’s (1952), who writes about the generational conflict and Jewish belief that: “One generation passeth away, and another generation cometh; but the earth abideth for ever” (48).

Uma Narayan (1997) in relation to new generations of South Asians in the diaspora suggests:
Inherited pictures of gender roles and family and social arrangements are often central elements both to one’s sense of self and to one’s sense of one’s social world. This is often true even when these roles and arrangements are, and are even experienced as, oppressive and restrictive. Rethinking them, and opening oneself to the process of collectively transforming them, is often likely to be an emotionally painful process. (36)

Rashmere Bhatti in her autobiographical piece “The Good Indian Girl” (1992) painfully recalls how the “oppressive and restrictive” influence of India, with its familial structures, worked in her family resulting in feelings of isolation. Bhatti notes that her parents were happy because “They thought they had been granted a gift from the gods, to have the fortune to live in Australia—the Lucky Country” (132). Her father who has lived much of his life in India before migrating to join his father, already working as a farmer on a plantation in Australia, is too rooted in the old ways of India and wants his children to grow up as Indians in Australia. Although we do not get glimpses inside her grandfather and father’s life of pioneer plantation workers and as village-folk, we are told that they were very traditional in their outlook. Her father believes that a women’s priority is as a homemaker and therefore a good girl should be married after completing her school education and “become a dutiful daughter and submissive wife” (134). The traditional South Asian society still judges men and women with their views on marriage and parenthood. It is expected from a woman that she possess maternal qualities—gentle, caring, emotional, and protective. These beliefs about the traditional family life in Australia are presented in Rashmere’s narration of her arranged marriage that occurred at a time when she was still studying and “trying hard to bring forward and unite” with her “new image” of an “Australian Indian” (134). However, she is told by her prospective husband’s family that “a wife’s place was in the home, that college was not important, that graduation could wait [ . . . ]” (134). Family pressure results in Rashmere’s bending to the demands of tradition and culture but also “self-loathing” as an “individual” because she didn’t want and expected this. Family’s pressure and father’s will are the two factors that make a crucial difference in the life of this second generation migrant woman. Rashmere notes that she finally gathered enough strength to revolt against the family pressure and began a new journey to re-define herself as an independent career-minded
woman, who is accepted on her own terms and worth in the society as an Indian-Australian with western outlook and way of life (133).

In Sunecta Peres Da Costa’s story “Sydney 2000” (2003), Lata, a second generation Indian-Australian, loves a German man named Fritz, just to rebel and escape from her parents and family pressure of arranged marriage. But she is “stunned” to find her “usually stingy parents” hosting them “a dinner during which they maintained a civility unseen for years” (46). She feels that it is a kind of “conspiracy.” On a previous occasion, during her trip to Mexico, she observes:

Her Mother reminded her to use protection and her Father enquired whether she needed money; after that they seemed to forget about her, in fact, got the days mixed up, neglected to collect her when, her face pinched with tears and sleeplessness, wrenched by their ardent goodbye, she arrived unwillingly home. (46)

While the issue of preservation of value-system in immigrant families has already generated much interest, this story offers a close look at not only the changing lives of the second generation children but also the first generation migrant parents in urban families. Here, the parents are ready to change and accept the generational differences and move ahead with times, as these new immigrants are primarily English-speaking urban professionals who have adjusted to their surroundings and evolved strategies of survival.

The Indo-Fijian past erupts into Canberra and Sydney in the case of writers Satendra Nandan, Brij V. Lal, and Madu Pasipanodya. They belong to a group of South Asian diaspora family, whom Parminder Bhachu (1986) calls “twice migrants”—those who themselves or their families had previously lived elsewhere in the South Asian diaspora. According to Longley (1997),

However alien they may be to Australian experience the rhythms of life and speech in Fiji in the second half of the twentieth century, as they are represented here, flow into the expanding pool of Australian cultural memory and demand to be recognised as part of its moral history and therefore, part of its moral responsibility. (220)

Madu Pasipanodya, in “A Family for Us” (2002), writes that the concept of family for her is a complex one. Born in Fiji, she was placed in an orphanage, together with her brother, by her 65-year old Indian father, after her biological mother ran away with a
younger indigenous Fijian man. Madu and her brother, Pratap, were adopted by an Australian couple. Madu says,

Our new mum and dad had white skin, but I didn’t care—I already knew what white people looked like. I just thought, ‘These ones are my ones, no one else’s.’ But when we went around Suva, people looked at us—three black kids and a white couple. The Indians and Fijians, I think they thought it was weird, like, how could that happen. (117)

What scares Pasipanodya is that when some teachers at her new Australian school got kids to do family trees: “Which family would I write about—my adopted family, or my Indian family back in Fiji?” (120). Thanks to her adoptive parents and other members of her extended Australian family, her transplantation is a smooth one. She sounds confident and is proud of her new “nice home” and “good family”—“I know I’ve got a good family here in Australia who actually love me. I’m privileged [. . .]” (124).

For Brij V. Lal, in “The Road to Mr Tulsi’s Store” (2003), growing up in a small village in Fiji as a Hindu was strange. He is more intrigued by the use and “presence of certain plants and items at the prayer mound on auspicious occasions” (44). He curiously asks the village priest: “Why bamboos, banana stems, rice and coconut?” (44). Priests answer to his queries is square: “Bamboo bends; it never breaks. So it was hoped would be the case with the family line” (44). In the case of the Indian-Fijian-Australian community the migration from the Indian subcontinent took place very long ago so “the tie of diasporic community to the homeland is conceptual rather than practical” (Manning 161). And the familial links and class consciousness are “maintained not so much by the movements of young people as by the memories and traditions of older people” (Manning 161).

Villages and their vibrant communities were once the core of the family life in South Asia or in the old diasporas around the World. Brij V. Lal, in “Marriage” (2004), describes a perfect Indian-Fijian village community scene regarding the impending marriage of Bhola and Sukhraj’s son:

“Can I say something Bhaug?” “Yes, Babu.” Sukhraj never called village men by their name, she always called them Babu or Badkau, husband’s younger and older brother, respectively. That was the village way. “Dewa is ready for marriage,” Nanka said, adding mischievously, “And you are not getting any younger either. Bhola bhai, you listen as well.” Bhola listened but didn’t say anything. “you
need someone besides Bhola bhai to look after you.” Nanka was what people in the village called a muh-chutta, a loudmouth, a harmless joker, an impotent flirt, not to be taken seriously.

“What are you people for?” Sukhraji replied instantaneously. “He is your son, too.” This was village talk. “Why don’t you people do something about it instead of putting all the responsibility on just the two of us?” “Was waiting for the word, Bhauji,” Nanka replied. “All go now. But remember one thing, I will be the first to embrace the Samadhin [the bride’s mother] [. . .]. “You can do whatever you want with her,” Sukhraji replied smiling. “Just find us a good homely girl for our boy.” (209-210)

The scene is filled with the traditional sights and sounds of a small village community. Bhola and Sukhraji are looking for a bride for their son from within the Indian-Fijian community. It is in this way Indian-Fijian families have constructed their relationship to the ways of land.

In his autobiographical narrative “Return to Bahraich” (1998) Brij V. Lal recounts how on auspicious occasions, “such as the birth of a grandchild,” his grandfather, who had come as an indentured labourer to Fiji, “would hold a huge bhandara to which all our far flung relatives and immediate neighbours would be invited” (92). He further notes that even the dead family members were not forgotten. His grandfather “would fast and pray and make a ritual offering of food on banana or taro leaves at a specially prepared prayer mound under the mango tree” (93). As family movements back to homeland or a return to homeland was not a tangible possibility for these communities, their “only way to stay in touch with the homeland was through the imagination” (Manning 161). Lal’s grandfather, who came to Fiji islands as an indentured labourer could never make the decision to return to Bahraich, his homeland, as his “family was always in financial difficulty” (93). Moreover, the fear of dishonour on return as he had married a woman from another caste keeps him in Fiji and “so time passed and memories of home faded, and, in the course of time, an intended temporary sojourn was transformed into permanent displacement” (93). For him and people like him the promise and desire of “a homecoming” becomes an “impossibility” (Chambers 5).

It is one of the chief characteristics of the old diasporas to think of “occasional pilgrimage to the ancestral homeland” in an “effort to create a new homeland”
(Manning 162). Brij V. Lal in "The Road to Mr Tulsi’s Store" (2003) declares that his aim in writing his memoir

was to discover the inner truths of a community’s life, its fears, hopes and aspirations, its rituals and ceremonies that gave it purpose and cohesion, the way it celebrated life and mourned its passing, the way it educated its young and taught them about their place in the world. (45)

He further professes fear that children who are growing up in the Indian-Fijian “transmigrant” community in Australia are

uncertain of their cultural identity, unsure of their way in the world. They are from Fiji but they are not Fijian; they look Indian but they are not Indian. [ ... ] Confused about who they are themselves, they are disbelieving of my own background. The world that formed me is alien to them. (46)

So his work, Mr Tulsi’s Store: A Fijian Journey (2001), is an attempt to “connect to today’s disconnected and dispersed generation of Indo-Fijians with their historical and cultural roots” (46). This urge, to tell a story and connect ourselves and the coming generations to our historical, cultural and familial roots, also sums up the purpose of imaginative writing in the context of South Asian diaspora literature.

Similarly, in his short stories Satendra Nandan traces the map of the journey of indentured labourers from India to Fiji. He excavates or “deciphers” his ancestors’ identity and in doing so explores his own identity. In Requiem for a Rainbow (2001) Nandan writes:

They had come from obscure villages: they had left no great manuscripts except their lives, if only one could decipher them. (113)

His grandparents came from Fiji to work on the farms owned by CSR, an Australian company and his father later worked on a leased farm, again from the same company. Nandan feels that his writing and the life experiences of the South Asian diasporans will also inspire other writers, who are travelling in the same boat.

I hope it inspires others to write their stories of the tragic events that have wrecked Fiji particularly the life of Fiji Indians—people whose narratives are woven with sorrow and betrayal but also with hope and inspiration. (6)

He is writing then, not just as an artist but as a chronicler recording history of his family and people to “gather up the fragments that remain, that nothing be lost” (6) for the coming generations.
Second generation Indian-Australian writer Chris Raja immigrated to Australia from Calcutta with his parents. He writes in “White Boots” (2003) that for his family adaptation to Australia was quite difficult at first, as back home, his parents belonged to a class of “middle-income professionals” who used to frequent and socialize with friends at the Dilhousie Institute, a famous club in Calcutta. His parents were part of a group of people, who left India because they felt limited by the lack of opportunities offered to them and in the hope of building a better future for their families in Australia. Most of the references used in the story to describe the family’s life in India are in contrast to their new life in Australia, where no one helped them learn the rudiments of settling down. They had to teach each other the basics of an Australian way of life.

Manning notes that in an “increasingly mobile world, family strategy focuses not only on how to live, but also on where to live” (174). This is one of the toughest questions that migrants face in relocating themselves, particularly if it is a whole family migration. Beryl T. Mitchell, writes in her autobiographical account “Tea, Tytlers and Tribes” (1997), that

We had naturally chosen to settle where we had some relatives for immediate company and advice, so Ashfield was the suburb of our choice. (306)

“Immediate company” and “advice,” of the extended family members or the ones, who have already migrated and settled, are the two important factors in relocation. She further writes,

My brother, John and his wife, Marina who had migrated the year before, also lived in Ashfield. They had arranged for us to rent a flat in the same block that they lived in. It was a comfort to have them close to us, to help in our initiation into this new life. (307)

But even with the support group, extended family members around, new migrants are always responsible for their own lives, progress and successes/failures in the hostland. Beryl, as the wife of a Manager, mistress of a household full of servants on a tea plantation had never done any household work—the results in Australia are hilarious. She feels it was good that her sister-in-law lived upstairs with a year’s experience in Australia. Otherwise, without the family support, she feels isolated in a “strange new country” (307). Her parents also migrated soon afterwards and she recalls, “We had been house-hunting every weekend, but not having yet found one that suited us, Mum
and Dad had to squeeze in with us. They were very understanding as we pushed the
furniture around, [...], we knew it was not going to be for too long, so everyone put
up with the discomfort” (307). Although a migrant’s flat is generally very small,
his/her heart is big enough to accommodate family members and friends.

Sunil Badami in “My Father’s Stories” (2006) remembers how his father, “a
big man,” with “big hands” and enormous arms “covered in thick black hair” would
sit on the verandah and tell them stories:

[...] from his long and distinguished career. [...] he always
reminded us, he may have been terrible with names, but he always
remembered faces, and beneath their skin, their stories.

His father worked as a flying doctor that suggested “something as romantic as a
pioneering aviator”:

He was well-respected in the community, and his many contributions
were well-noted and regarded. I felt proud when people from old Earl
in Top Pub to Matey at the General Stores regarded me with the
conferred respect of the Doctor’s Family.

They family lived in a small town community, where “everybody in our town knew
everybody, and most knew everybody else’s business.” The narrator says that his
father “instilled in me a greater appreciation of home, of the easy familiarity of a
small town like ours.” The narrator says that he didn’t know about his parents past
and early life. To him, “it seems as if the moment of their meeting was the point at
which, like caterpillars, our parents cast off their pasts, and changed into the people
they were when we knew them.”

On the issue of race and class, Hugh Tinker (1977) notes that social theorists
like Karl Marx and Max Weber “taught Europeans to view their own society in terms
of class,” and one school of contemporary sociologists see “race as a kind of class”
(15). A point well illustrated by David Cannadine in his book Ornamentalism (2001),
where he argues that it was class, not race that drove the British empire. Taking this as
a salient feature of colonial beginnings, Paranjape (2007) further argues that “in effect
class and race are intertwined” (355) in Australia and provided Australians a
“primordial” logic to look “down upon the Aborigines and the immigrants” (355).
This notion, although a complex one, forms the process by which class identities and
differences have been deeply manifested in Australia and amongst its various
diasporas. South Asian migrants, as Tinker notes, appeared as an “underclass”—
labourers, farmers, lascars, hawkers, cameleers, sailors, ayahs or nannies, valets, and household servants in Australia.

Racism or racial and class prejudices in Australia are a constant underlying theme in most of the stories dealing with South Asian families. In Mena Abdullah’s stories set in 1950s the narrator’s family runs a farm that, according to Shirley Tucker, not only “provides them with a relatively comfortable living” but also acts as a “sanctuary that protects them from the bigotry of the local townspeople.” In “Because of the Rusilla,” the three children, when they go into the town for the first time with their uncle, are surrounded by three “white children” of their own age and taunted and called “Nigger” (16). In Sunil Govinnage’s “Ugly Hair” from Black Swans and Other Stories (2002), Jayadeva’s daughter Sunitha is teased by her classmates for having “yucky black hair” (44). The impact of their teasing on her is that she has a feeling that the children do not like her and don’t want to play with her. Jayadeva is shattered on hearing about racism at such a tender age and observes “they can’t discriminate against you on the basis of your skin” (44). The Principal of the school understands the worry and anxiety of a lot of families who are new migrants. Using the school song, he sends out a strong message to the local community that Australia is a multi-cultural society with “an unwritten policy called fair-go” (46):

"Human beings are a funny old lot
Some are tall and some are short
Some are thin and some are fat
Some are Blue, some are Green..." (46)

The song presents the diversity of Australia and story of its migrants. Sunitha, on the annual day, is given an award “for courteous manners and adjusting well into a new environment” (45). Jayadeva, as an immigrant father feels proud on the success of his daughter and is more attracted towards the “great tradition” of family and community values of non-racism (46).

In “Missing Pieces” (1997) Gordon Mathews writes that he was always negotiating his colour and race in Australia and was often “plagued with anxiety and confusion” (296) by the question “who I am.” For much of his life he thought that he was of Aboriginal descent. His white Australian adoptive parents never told him how he was adopted and the mystery of his birth was kept a secret from other children of the household. While his birth-mother Colette tried hard to search for him, she was
“unaware of the changes to Victorian state adoption legislation and the existence of a register on which she was qualified to place her name to indicate she wished to contact her relinquished child” (295). Gordon seeks out his natural parents to discover more about his Aboriginal tribe and family history. But his search incidentally leads him to his Sri Lankan heritage—Colette as his biological mother and he himself the illegitimate son of a Sri Lankan plantation owner. His initial reaction is of shock and he writes:

Undoubtedly it was the most devastating news I had ever received, tearing the rug out from under my feet. For a decade and a half I had claimed to be something that I was not. Margaret’s news, had redefined entirely the parameters of who I was. (296)

Mathew’s earlier theory and strong belief that he was from Aboriginal descent was based on anthropological suggestions by his friends and colleagues. He notes:

My conviction ever since childhood that my natural father wasn’t white had now been confirmed as entirely correct but my belief that he was Aboriginal had been proved wrong. (296)

Among the anxieties provoked in Gordon by his discovery that his father was not Aboriginal, and that his family heritage was Sri Lankan, was a certain insecurity about his status and his personal ordeal of “de-Aboriginalisation” (Rowse 68). Colette and Vivian’s other children take the news with total acceptance. Although Janet, Gordon’s sister is not able to come to terms with this new identity and lashes out at Vivian for hiding the truth from the family for so long. Colette feels that Janet’s reaction is just of shock and she will recover. As a parent, who fulfilled her duties towards them she asks the children to be dutiful in turn.

At the end of the day, if the children can’t share my joy and come along for the ride, then that’s just too bad. I’ve devoted my life to them and now it’s my turn. (297)

Colette, as Gordon Mathews’ biological mother, is thankful to his adoptive parents, especially mother, whom she refers to as “a very special woman.” She can fully understand what his Australian family might be undergoing. At the end she asks for a photograph, to see “if there are family resemblances” (298). For Gordon growing up in Australia thinking of himself as an Aboriginal, because of his dark skin, had both pros and cons or in Tim Rowse’s (2006) words “meant being positioned both negatively in popular culture and positively in official culture” (68). Rowse further notes that “between the act of identification and this discovery, Gordon learnt to be
Aboriginal” (67). At school and college, Gordon was aware of racism and was teased in a cruel way and “taunted with epithets” such as “little Abo” and “boong” while the positive side of his proclaiming Aboriginal identity was that he got reserved study grants, career breaks and was also favoured by the state practices of representing “Aboriginal heritage” as “part of Australia’s nationhood” (Rowse 68).

Surinder Jain in his autobiographical story “One Desi Man’s Encounter with Racism” narrates how his family, particularly his father, shaped his early prejudices and racist attitude towards their Sikh, Madrasi and Anglo-Indian neighbours in Delhi. He writes

When I was a child growing up in a refugee colony in Delhi, one of neighbours sold their house to an Anglo-Indian family. The Anglo-Indian family with a mother and three daughters, father visiting them occasionally from England was a puzzle for me as a seven years old child [sic]. Me and my sisters were forbidden to play with the malechas as were most of the other kids on our almost exclusive west Punjabi Hindu refugee majority street. [. . . ] My parents never gave me any explanation of what was wrong with that family and why I could not play with those girls.

Similarly, he was allowed to play with the Madrasi but not allowed to eat anything from his house as his own family was pure vegetarian while the Madrasi family used to eat fish and meat. He writes

I heard from other kids on the street that the Madrasis are very skinny because they eat rice all the time, they DO NOT eat wheat, what a disgrace!!!!!! A group of kids including me starting teasing the Madrasi man [sic]. As he would walk past us on our street, one of us would follow him and shout Idli, Sambar, Dosa etc. The Madrasi man would keep walking as if we did not exist.

Surinder Jain’s grandfather, himself a refugee immigrant from Pakistan, punished the children for their “prejudicial” behaviour by making them all “go to the Madrasi house and touch the feet of the Madrasi man and seek his forgiveness.” Towards the end of the story, Jain, who is now well settled in Australia, writes that sometimes he wants to go back to his father and “accuse him of being a racist.” But on the other hand he feels that his father, in his own way, was only “protecting” him from “diluting” his culture and family heritage. He further observes that the “understanding and courage to go beyond petty racism” and acceptance of other migrant groups in Australia that he now has is the result of his father and his family’s teachings of
human virtues. This has helped him in truly understanding the meaning of the traditional adage: “the whole world is one family.”

Two of the important institutions that have survived through the ages are community and family. They are interconnected and central to one’s life. Alice, in Frances Isaac’s “My Little House” (1999), participates actively “with pride” in any “community activity that takes place in her home suburb—from maintaining the fund-raising stall at the local church fête, to joining others in the neighbourhood on any other door-knocking mission in order to raise money for a worthy cause” (15). She is employed as a worker (caretaker) at the Kenilworth Group House “with a group of young men who are intellectually challenged” (15). For her, the three boys under her care are like her three sons—“a sort of an extended family,” in her little house (19). In her role as a mother figure to these boys, Alice is amazed by Wellie and his skill with numbers. He is an autistic young man, from a South Asian background and has keen interest in learning computing. Wellie’s mother told Alice that “back in her old country, children born with disabilities were cared for at home” (20). In South Asia the family supports the old, takes care of widows, never-married adults, and the disabled; it also assists during periods of unemployment and provides security and a sense of support and togetherness; unlike Australia, where such children are left at Group Houses by the parents to be taken care of by others. Alice knows this but feels that in Eastern cultures “although parents took upon themselves the full responsibility to care for a child at home” they in some ways with such a practice, also “hampered the person’s growth” (20). She helps Wellie learn computers and in “doing things beyond what she was expected to do” loses her job (21). Alice shows a sense of harmony and concern for others beyond the call of duty. Her Social Role Valorisation technique with Wellie is successful and he is able to “integrate with the mainstream society” (18). Alice knows that Wellie is twice marginalized—as a migrant and autistic, and therefore he can only be helped by treating him as normal, like everyone else. A Family away from home that Alice provides to Wellie, gives him the confidence to be an independent individual and strength to participate as an equal member in the Australian society.

Diasporic location also acts as the site through which domesticity and sexuality is played out. Sujhatha Fernandes in “A Pocket Full of Stories” (1990) presents the sexual exploitation of a servant girl from Mangalore in the household of a
Goan family. This family is also trying to replicate the Indian social structure and class consciousness while living in Sydney. Nandini, a Mangalorean servant girl from India, who belongs to another class, is presented as “a small, skinny, black girl” (90). Sexual exploitation plus class exploitation is seen working throughout the story. However, the exploiter here is not an Australian but the Indian-Australian employer of Nandini. She is raped and made pregnant by the narrator’s uncle. The whole family blames Nandini for this and she is made to leave Sydney for the trouble she has caused the family. For the narrator and readers it is not just a rape in physical and sexual terms but it is rape of a dream, of a conjurer whose “pocket was full of stories [. . .] never ending multicoloured [. . .] tales” (91).

Similarly, class differences, exploitation at work, and status consciousness away from homeland in a foreign country is highlighted in Chitra Fernando’s “The Chasm” from Women There and Here (1994) by exploring difference in attitude towards two individuals belonging to different class and strata’s of Sri Lankan society, who have just immigrated to Australia. In the first case, Manel, a nurse, who has arrived only eight months ago from Sri Lanka is used as a servant in the house of the Registrar of the hospital, Veeran Tampoe, also a Sri Lankan. Veeran’s wife, Nelun, hates cooking, washing and cleaning and to her [. . .] the timely arrival of Manel, a common or garden weed, had saved her from a situation which would have come dangerously close to crushing the lily on those occasions when hospitality demanded lavish meals. (53)

Although, Manel is not a servant but a trained nurse, for the Tampoe family and their other Sri Lankan friends in the small community of Alice Springs her status is of a commoner from homeland and who “wasn’t one of them” (54). Manel is also the butt of jokes because of her accent and mixing of her “ps” and “fs” as “English wasn’t her first language” (54). Her way of speaking differs a lot from other migrant’s convent school and foreign university educated accent. One of the community highbrow thinks that Manel’s mixing with them on intimate occasions will make her “feel like a fish out of water” (54) but is assured by Veeran that “he would see to it that Manel didn’t stray from her side of the social fence” (54). No one from the community likes Manel and this is reflected in her treatment at a picnic party where she has been invited to assist the Tampoes (55). The affluent members of the community gave “suppressed
Chapter 6 - Home and the World

smiles, the meaningful looks, or simply the slight curtness” which was brought on by something she’d said innocently (55), but they also tried hard to be civil and expected “deference” in return from Manel. She knows what they feel about her and her class but when she is not made to eat the food with them during the picnic, she couldn’t take it anymore and politely but assertively told them that it was kind of you because I know we are very different people. You are rich and educated. So maybe you thought me a fool. Maybe I was a fool to think you liked me. I am a simple village woman. To me your ways are strange. So, I think I’ll leave your picnic now. (62)

The educated and rich people of her own community are unable to understand her pain, although they believe that Australia is fair to everyone and is a land of opportunities, money and equality but to them “all this equality business has turned that girl’s head and she forgets that there are boundaries which must be respected” (57). They want their status quo to persist in the small Sri Lankan-Australian community. They know that Manel is liked by one of the Australian doctors working in the same hospital and feel that it is his “attentions” that have gone to her head. They see a possibility of Manel’s marriage and her becoming a surgeon’s wife thereby attaining a higher status. The community further feels that it is the Australians’ fault that a status quo is not being maintained:

These Aussies—decent chaps and all that—but a bit dense when it comes to the finer points of birth and breeding. (62)

And even if she is able to marry an Australian doctor, for the Sri Lankans in Australia a change in Manel’s “civil status,” will “never change her ancestry” (63). They won’t give her the same respect as they would give to a person having a family name and equal or higher status. Here one is reminded of Roland Barthes (1984) remarks that when the petit-bourgeois is a man unable to imagine the “Other,” he comes face to face with him, blinds himself, ignores and denies him, or else transforms him into himself. In the example of Manel, how the dominant Sri Lankan community seeks to contain the “Other” and maintain its status quo and place in society in the diaspora is most revealing. They caricature, silence and marginalise her, and turn her into a comic spectacle or clown—using “strategies of negation” (Dissanayake xx). The difference between the privileged and unprivileged in homeland continues to be a
marker of a class boundary in Australia as the “migrants mark the outer limits” and also provide a point “which gives the norm some scope and dimension” (Sarup 12).

Families and communities in the diaspora can also expect to receive new, young migrants from time to time. The second visitor to this small community is Vijay, a sociologist from Colombo, on a ten day holiday. His “being a friend of Veeran Tampoe’s brother automatically made him the prized possession of the Tampoes” (53; my italics). As his visit and stay offered the Tampoes an opportunity for an entirely natural display of large quantities of crystal, silver, an elegant blue-and-white dinner service and a twelve-piece walnut dining suite unavoidable at lavish meals [. . . ]. (53)

Vijay, first feels elated by their hospitality and is touched by their gestures of friendliness but later on observes the community critically and understands that “the covert intent of the Tampoe-Mendis-Ahamed probing concerning his family and friends” (56) was in order to find out if he was “one of them” (56). And also if he knew the right people, studied in the best university, and if his views on Yale, Oxford and Cambridge were similar to theirs. Although, they were satisfied about his ancestry, yet

There was something about him that they were beginning to find disconcerting: the occasional expression suspiciously like amusement as they were talking about serious matters, his observation on men, manners and morals. These indicated not the outsider, but the apostate. (56)

Being a sociologist, these diasporans with their class consciousness are at best subjects for his “ironical contemplation” (56). To him

They’re like primitives. No one at home in Sri Lanka will believe this [. . . ]. There was here the rage, the frustration of the disposed. The supermarket cornucopia and the electric plenty were there; they laughed all the way to the bank. Yet deep within, they were dispirited. The landscape, its endless flatness broken only by huge bumps of rock or deep clefts, overwhelmed them. They talked to people. An exchange of sounds with no engagement of the spirit. (61)

Soon the community realizes that Vijay, although status-wise is one of them but he is a man who “dreams of equality” (57) and class and social revolution back home. His views strongly suggest that the subordinate position of women, represented by Manel, is inextricably linked to a class-based capitalist system, and the community and family structure within that system. Only if the capitalist economic system is changed
Chapter 6 – Home and the World

Sarwal 278

can the exploitation of women and lower classes end (see Jhalani 2010). With his leftist views that are anti-status quo, Vijay is not welcome anymore in this community, as he notices in the “absence of conventional hospitality formula—the polite request to come again” (63-64), while taking leave. This further reflects the coldness of their hearts and the false expectations and values that people adhere to in the name of traditions, customs, and social practices in a community (Paranjape, 2007: 354).

In 1962, David Cooper had insisted, in The Death of the Family, that human and especially women’s oppression was grounded in the family (and class), which “obscurely filters out most of our experience and then deprives our acts of any genuine and generous spontaneity” (8). Cooper’s central argument was that the family was crucial to hegemony, “reinforcing the effective power of the ruling class in any exploitive society by providing a highly controllable paradigmatic form for every social institution” (5-6; my italics). The diasporan community’s search in Fernando’s story is for a status quo ante, to maintain the state in which class structures worked before migration. Being the first to arrive to Australia from their respective communities they feel a notion of “ownership” of this small community and the opportunities offered and have a vague feeling of the power to exclude others like Manel, low class recent immigrants, from better prospects and therefore behave in an antagonistic manner in their formal relationship to such individuals.

Similarly, the Burgher family presented in Michelle De Kretser’s story “Life with Sea Views” (2000) suffers because of the tribulations (civil war and Emergency), linguistic and class differences, and poor (and exploitative) conditions of Sri Lanka’s socio-political-economic structures. The family is represented by a murdered father (killed by LTTE), paralysed mother, two sisters—Estelle and Monique, and a brother—Ned. The family has seen better days in Sri Lanka, as references to the children’s playing tennis in the club and their beautiful house on the hill seem to suggest (1). But their fate changes as soon as the civil war starts between the Tamils (LTTE) and Sri Lankan government (Sinhalese). The Burghers being the minority are worst hit. The father, who was also having an affair with a Tamil “black woman from the fishing shanties” (3), is found dead in mysterious circumstances—“Father pitched head-first into a clump of oleanders. The soles of his shoes had worn thin on the instep [. . . ]” (3). Money that was never a problem for this family is suddenly of
prime importance as is the higher education of Ned, the only living male member in
the family, for a better job. The dreams of the family are shattered as Ned falls to bad
ways and fails repeatedly in his exams. For this marginalized Burgher family things
are not the same anymore. To take control of the situation, one of the sisters, Estelle,
marries Harry, a Sri Lankan-Australian, and migrates to Australia as an escape route
from her Sri Lankan life of misery. Her brother Ned, who works for the railways now,
also dreams of “sailing to Australia” (10) but dies because of drinking too much
liquor and depression. The remaining members depend on Estelle for monetary help.
In Australia, Estelle can work, save and also send a part of her income to help her
poor family members. But for the family members, Estelle’s divorcing Harry and
living with a Slovene migrant, Stefan, represents “living in sin with a communist”
(10). As discussed earlier in Chapter three, to them Estelle’s letters too are
incomprehensible, obscure and a “puzzle,” as the family cannot understand the
references to the an Australian way of life (8). Estelle wants her sister, Monique, to
join her in Australia and asks, “What is there to stay for now?” (12). Monique, who
always dreamt of journeys cannot bear the “sadness” and pain of leaving Sri Lanka
and her ancestral “brown house on a green hill” (1) and kills herself by jumping in
front of a train. By the end of the story the family is completely destroyed by the
changing conditions and internal conflict in Sri Lanka. It is only to Estelle, who has
migrated to Australia, the Lucky Country that life offers a “light and change” (13).

Migration is not always a highly individual decision. The concentration of
migrant families from South Asia in the major capital cities of Australia has a number
of implications for the job markets, services, and possibly community relations (see
Inglis and Wu 204). Jayadeva, in Sunil Govinnage’s “Arrival” from Black Swans and
Other Stories (2002), who has just immigrated to Australia with his family from the
war-torn Sri Lanka, is surprised to note that “there was not a single soldier or security
officer guarding the airport” (38). To him Australia is really a lucky country: “No
Civil Wars. No ethnic divisions, No wars at all!” (38). He could see a better future for
his family as

He carefully stepped out of the arrival lounge, placing his right foot
first, as he was setting out on an important journey, a custom he had
learnt as a child from his parents. [. . . ] he was stepping out into a new
country, to lead a new life. (39)
Officials at the airport were polite and people fast and efficient, and he thinks indeed it is a lucky country—"his second homeland" (35). Until, the family meets the taxi driver, a migrant from Lebanon, who was a thoracic surgeon back home and is now driving a taxi to sustain his family in Australia. Although, he is bitter about Australian Medical Council Exam, a must for Asians and non-whites that he couldn’t pass and it took him two years to recover from this shock, but he and his family have adjusted and are happy. He sarcastically says to Malini, Jayadeva’s wife, who is a paediatric surgeon:

"Welcome to this lucky country. [...] The exam is there to eliminate candidates. [...] If you come from a white country, like England or South Africa, there are no exams for doctors. All the doors are open to you." (40-41)

But if you are a non-white then "it’s a long journey" (41). He is frustrated on how Australia—the "clever country"—treats its "educated migrants" (40). Migrants with professional skills are often disappointed when they discover that their skills may be in poor demand or their qualifications not recognised by the rigid Australian rules and regulations. Furthermore, the only work available to them carries not only less pay, but lowers their occupational and therefore social status.

Angelika Bammer (1994) notes, that the family is also "a vital nexus between the outer social world and the inner world of the individual psyche, the relationship of a given family to its social context is critical to the psychological development and well-being of an individual" (99). Suneeta Peres Da Costa in "Long Division" (1997) presents a dysfunctional Indian-Australian migrant family. Narrator’s mother is a maniac depressive and father is heart-broken by grief and responsibilities of work and domestic duties of taking care of his three young daughters. Mother’s illness has affected Mina’s studies and relationship with her friends at school and in the neighbourhood. Mr Heaney, the Mathematics teacher writes to Mina’s family: “Mina seems distracted in class. She frequently makes errors. I am hoping her score will improve in the forthcoming exam” (5). She is fazed by the episodes that occur in her household and the disrupted domestic life has taken a toll on her studies. Mina sees in her friend Anna’s life the perfect rhythm and movement of the exchanges between siblings, and the effort on the mother’s part to maintain interest in the staggered tales of
which teacher did what at school and which child got into trouble and what embarrassing things had been said [...]. (9)

Mina observes that “the wide-eyed interest” of Anna’s mother is “never diminishing, preempting with her brilliant green eyes the small joys her children had brought home to share with her” (9). On the other hand Mina’s mother with her depressive suicidal behaviour has made the relationship devoid of familial “sophistication” (10). Mina observes her “barren house” that often reminded her of the “possibility” that her mother “might be dead in any one of its rooms” (10). In moments of despair, sorrow and defeat, Mina wishes for her mother “to die” (8). Presented through a child’s point of view the falling apart of the migrant family is poignant. This is probably a common attitude of children in a marriage that is falling apart. But unfortunately, this is also very destructive for the child.

Glenn D’Cruz in “Beyond the Pale” (2004), on reflecting on his family life in India observes that “They were part of the Anglo-Indian railway class, and lived on a modest income in a humble abode without running water, domestic servants or the various other conveniences of bourgeois life” (230). His father is class conscious and knows that to overcome their marginal status and be successful in Australia as a migrant, attaining social mobility through “respectable” jobs is a necessity for second generation. He notes

My father had a somewhat bizarre obsession with office work, and hoped that I would become a clerk, a position that signified a high social status among his generation of Anglo-Indians. He even made me sit the public service entrance exam, against my wishes, when I was fifteen. A few years later he got me a job as a sheet metal worker’s assistant because he feared that remaining idle for three months between the end of school and the beginning of university would be bad for my “character.” (226)

In the eyes of Glenn’s father, his son’s early lifestyle in Australia as a musician is seen as something with “no ambition and no prospects” (226). It represents wasting an opportunity. Through his research into the Anglo-Indian community, Glenn notes the factors that shaped his father’s attitude and principles. He knew that the Anglo-Indians did not have emotional ties with India but only ancestral links. He now knows why his family immigrated to Australia in the early 1970s. He realises that it is Australia “despite experiencing various degrees of racism” and not India where his “father’s bourgeois ambitions were more or less realised” (230). He further observes
that it is in Australia that his family “managed ultimately to acquire the accoutrements of middle-class life—‘respectable’ jobs, houses, cars and so forth—all of which seemed beyond their grasp in post-independence India” (230).

Christopher Cyrill’s autobiographical short story “The Ganges and its Tributaries” (1993) is also a fine example of the genre of family history. Cyrill by using this genre makes an important contribution, like Mena Abdullah, to the narratives dealing with life experiences of first generation South Asian migrants. He acts as

A chronicler who recites events without distinguishing between major and minor ones [and] acts in accordance with the following truth: nothing that has ever happened should be regarded as lost for history. (Benjamin, 1968: 256)

Cyrill notes how his Anglo-Indian family grew and extended in Australia:

My parents began sponsoring relatives to Australia in 1976. Every three months or so a different aunt, uncle and their family would arrive from India and stay with us until they found jobs. (163)

He further notes that

[... ] As soon as they [family members from India] appeared in the doorway of Gate 8B, I expected the women’s saris and the man’s knee-length shirts and cloth pants to change, as if Australia would disrobe them. I hoped that the accents I heard would disappear by the time each family had left the airport.

When he saw our relatives my father gasped, as if he was trying to decide which language to speak in. (165)

The arrival and relocation of the extended family, although a happy occasion of meeting and celebration, for Christopher is also a moment of dislocation:

I cannot recall any time when my parents and I were alone after the first of my relatives arrived. It seems now as if I was always being displaced from my bed by an aunt or uncle [...]. (166)

The world vision that Mena Abdullah presented in her story “A Long Way” is taken a step further by Cyrill, when his father explained his motive to come to Australia:

“Opportunity. India is starving and I want my children to be fat. I once wanted you to marry an Indian girl, but now I want you to mix your genes. You are Anglo-Indian born in Australia. You are like a trinity—marry, mix.” (167)
Lack of opportunities in India i.e. economic constraints have motivated Cyrill’s father to leave his original homeland in search of livelihood or economic betterment of the family and migrate to Australia.

His father further presents his idea of the envisioned future for his family:

“The world is getting smaller. One race, soon there will be only one race. I want my grandchildren to eat naans with spaghetti. No more cousins marrying cousins. At the start there was only one country; now water separates us. Drift, you must mix. [ . . . ]” (167)

This desire for change through communal linkages is his vision and new project (the first one being to bring India to Australia). It is imperative to note here that members of a diaspora could end up with a mix or hybrid or even a recombination of cultures and identities, with aspects retained from its ‘home’ culture. Understanding one another, appreciating similarities even within the apparent differences, are the ideals of multiculturalism. The image of grandchildren eating “naans with spaghetti” is the image of a cosmopolitan and multicultural society as proposed in the “melting pot” model. Using the imagery of the food and talking about his father’s culinary skills, Cyrill celebrates Australia’s notion of food, which Gunew (1993) notes “has long been an acceptable face of multiculturalism.” She further notes that in Australia

one of the few unthreatening ways to speak of multiculturalism is in relation to food, in other words to say that all migrants have improved the diversity of national cuisine. The usual way in which this diversity is celebrated is through a multicultural food festival. (16)

For Christopher’s father, race mixing is a positive option not just for Anglo-Indians but also for other migrant groups present in Australia. Once people become related by marital relations the hatred in the world will also diminish, as his father says, “they cannot hate without hating themselves” (167).

In the beginning of the story narrator’s father had built a floating model of India, left to drift in an artificial pond at the back of his house. Christopher writes at the end:

My father had thrown the model of India away [. . . ]. Rainwater had made the dye on the shoelaces run, creating fictitious tributaries of the Ganges that ran up through the Himalayas, across the silken Thar Desert and down through Mysore and Madurai to the Gulf of Mannar. The sandalwood Himalayas had been chipped away by my stray cover drives, and the wind had blown all the toothpicks from the map.
Occasionally I would find a flag of India in the garden when I went to retrieve a cricket ball. (148)

What happens to this construction of a floating model of India, in some ways also represents the father’s position and desire to melt within the Australian society and thus “end the construction of two disparate, even, opposing positions” (S. Hussain 115). Probably, this is a result of certain encounters with the perceived “Other” groups in Australia that have lead to this transformation as migration and interaction with the other groups often “encourages one to think of connections, at least because every migration connects a point of origin and a destination” (Manning 2). Australian government, seeing a large number of family migrations, has also emphasised the need of the concept such as “the Australian way of life” as the basis of its policy to assimilate migrants (see Stratton and Ang 151).

Conclusion

Retention and reproduction of class separations, ancestral customs, language and religion, and marriage patterns in the diaspora consciously and unconsciously from the first to the second generation often obscures the role of the class under these family narratives and histories. But an analysis of the behaviour, language, and subscription to a common ethnic or national identity in the diaspora highlights social differences and class identities that are also linked to society, power and circumstance. Class separations are readily expressed and manifest themselves through such acts as the branding of the lower classes, conspicuous consumption, spatial settlement practices and educational decisions. It also gives a person a sense of personal location, which in turn is linked to a person’s lived experience, in homeland and hostland, and shaped by gender, ethnicity, religion, class, race, sexual orientation, nationality, education, and occupation (see Canella and Grieshaber 2001). Education and employment are important signifiers of class position both in the diaspora and homeland. Class identity in the diaspora also provides us with a location in the mainstream world and thus helps in making sense of social, cultural, economic and political changes taking place around an individual and family. Thus class identity examines how a person fits in to the diasporic community and also in the mainstream Australian society. There is thus a wide spectrum of representation of class consciousness from Menal and Nandini, who are subjected to an extreme form of re-
assertion of class structures to the attitude of Cyrill’s father, who wants his children to “mix” not just culturally but through matrimony as well.

These South Asian diaspora family and class narratives belong to Australian family histories and the more they are told and written, “the clearer it becomes that they cannot be swept aside” (Longley 220). We cannot understand South Asian diasporic literature without understanding the ways in which family and class are intertwined in literary discourse in terms of migration strategies involved. Indeed, in stories such as these the personal recollection of the events is mixed with fictional ones. But this helps in defining a sense of identity—“who is an Australian” (Jayasuriya, 2006: 2). As migration does not involve one act, but is an on-going process of negotiation between the individual, the family, the community and the adopted country, an immigrant family therefore first has to come to terms with the immediate environment of the home that one is leaving behind. They are not just leaving behind a home but “a larger extended family,” with all the “emotional bonds, affective ties, memories of times past and present, likes and dislikes, the sense of sharing-together tribulations, joys, sorrows and many such moments” (Bilimoria and Ganguly-Scraser 122). For South Asian migrants, family is the central unit of attachment where the subject finds a stable sense of identity.

South Asian immigrants, according to Sharmila Rudrappa (2002), perceive the home as “a utopia, an autonomous space outside the influences of a competitive, uncertain, and potentially alienating world where they are marginal to a public discourse that takes the white society as the norm” (92). Furthermore, home and family for the diasporans “remains a safe haven to which the immigrant retires from public scrutiny” (92). She further observes that this “private sphere” is often seen as a “separate social universe, unsullied by the happenings of the public world” and in the privacy of their homes South Asians are “able to practice their religion, speak their language, cook their Indian foods, and, crucially, reproduce their families in what is considered to be the ‘Indian’ way” (Rudrappa 92).

South Asian family, particularly the patriarchal family, also “produces universalized assumptions” of its being “a space of oppression and naturalization of sexuality and gender” (Fortier, 2000: 4). But it is also the primary ground for “the production and transmission of culture” (Fortier, 2000: 4). Often culture shock can
lead to "a denial of the old" and "a desire to find acceptance by totally and uncritically adopting the new." It can also lead to "a desperate clinging to the old and an encapsulation allowing of no change" (Banchevska 189). Thus by preserving their family structure and "family code of life" (Tinker 11) the South Asian diaspora also preserves with it their cultural and intellectual productions. In addition to the stories of migration or about migration, the theme of development of family through migration as seen in these stories is also an important one. Because of migration many families stretched out over long distances, thus breaking the existing families and also forming new families (see Manning 118). Migration to Australia also brought new social and class distinctions amongst the South Asian diasporans as each family, in setting its strategy for life in the new homeland, faced the questions: whom to include in the family unit? and whether to give priority to social security or economic advancement?

These narratives present the broader context of social, structural and economic changes occurring in South Asian diaspora in Australia. On reading these narratives one feels as if "these authors, in writing [...] have assumed the histories of families is included indirectly in their stories" (Manning 124). South Asian immigrants, as presented in these narratives, consider their families as the main reason for their success. Transnational networks are extremely important in the family sphere. South Asian family emerges as a small community of an extended family network of relatives and friends, with nuclear family occupying a central position in diaspora's social structure. In some of the stories, older people within the community also provide guidance and moral support as they were influenced by the white culture to a larger degree. In the case of those who came directly to Australia from the Indian subcontinent and entered as more or less complete family units, the idea of an immediate return to home is out of the scene despite the challenges of racism and generational conflicts (see also Ballard 23). Resembling the protagonists in the narratives analysed in this chapter, South-Asian-Australian participants, in Fijac and Sonn’s study (2004) indicated that the family unit was the primary source of support, when they experience rejection, racism and violent threats from the host society or when their own communities do not accept their views. The family provides a safe haven from harsh external forces and affirms identities. So in spite of all the odds and
challenges the South Asian diaspora family triumphantly affirms faith in its permanence.

According to Angelika Bammer (1994), the South Asian diaspora family can provide a foundation for their groundedness:

it can provide the sense of coherence that holds an individual in place, particularly in times of external uncertainty. In such times, when the world outside appears a threatening and alien place, the family can seem the bedrock of constancy and security that one must hold onto at all costs. Yet this insistence on holding family together—on not letting go—risks destroying the very bonds it was meant to sustain. (97)

Families of migrants have “sacrificed a lot in order to successfully build themselves a new life elsewhere. No one likes to see or admit to himself or herself that one’s massive sacrifices and investment in a new life have yielded social or psychological misery” (Hage, 2005: 494). Family values, in other words, respect for the family and all it entails has certainly emerged as a core value for most South Asians in the diaspora, family then also acts as “the bond that that embodies the promise of protection” (Bammer 91), unites the family members against discrimination, racism and class prejudices from the outside society, and acts as a link through the past, present, and future despite the differences between members of first, second and subsequent generations.

Endnotes

<http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_hb6396/is_2_21/ai_n29051545/>.