Chapter Four
BrAsian Working Women: “Pawns of Power” or “Agents of Change”

4 Introduction.

The chapter examines how the careers of BrAsian women, and their participation in the labour sector, shapes their identities. The chapter begins with a brief history of BrAsian labour, and a reference to the career options open to BrAsians in the period under survey. The first section also includes discussions on discrimination, survival tactics, and the role of consumerism among BrAsians which necessitate women’s labour, how it affects the woman herself and the family, and the importance of fictional representation. The second section deals with the contemporary trends in BrAsian women’s labour, availability of jobs and career options. The third section involves a detailed discussion of the textual representation of the various types of labour performed by the BrAsian women, with reference to the socio-economic history already discussed in the first two sections. This section examines the kinds of labour performed by women: there are portrayals of women’s domestic labour, work in factories, piecework done at home, work in stores, clerical work, and their contribution in the trained and educated sector of academics, research, the media, law, the arts and social work. The fourth and fifth sections of the chapter offer findings and conclusions regarding the ways in which their participation in labour constructs new identities for them, as opposed to their identities as children or adolescents; or as older women with family responsibilities in the diaspora.

The texts considered in this chapter are A Wicked Old Woman, stories from Right of Way, Anita and Me, Hari-jan, Transmission, Memories of Rain, Glassblower’s Breath, stories from Flaming Spirit, A Sin of Colour, Looking for Maya, Life Isn’t..., Gypsy Masala, Coral Strands, Chapatti or Chips, One Hundred Shades of White, The Cambridge Curry Club and Beyond Indigo. The other texts mentioned are Sumitra’s Story, The Red Box, Haven’t Stopped Dancing Yet, and Brick Lane.

4.1 Brief History Of BrAsian Labour.

Like many other imperial histories, British history has always been internally fraught with inequalities: Marx wrote his Das Capital (1867) in Soho, among
disaffected, disenfranchised British mill and factory workers. There have been migrations of workers into Britain over the years, especially in the 1950s and 1960s, which gradually led to the technological migrations and sojourning that increased phenomenally in the new millennium. For the purpose of this study, the interlinked impact of the late 1950s and 60s labour migration, as well as the 1970s and early 80s “brain drain” from South Asia which continues to trickle into the post globalisation emigrations of the late 1980s and 90s, are of maximum historical interest.

Britain always had discriminating factors built into the employment scenario: differences of class, type of education, and even regionalism – North-South, English-Irish, town-country – have always marked employment patterns in Britain before the immigrant labour arrived (Chandan 1986; Brah 2006). Even though there were sporadic responses to such discrimination, since the 1950s, this discrimination has led to working class movements in mainstream art as well, especially in theatre, e.g. the angry theatre and “kitchen-sink” drama. In John Osborne’s play, Look Back In Anger (Faber and Faber 1957), Alison reports how Jimmy Porter talks about the discrimination faced by the lower class student coming from a “white-tiled”, second-grade, university, as opposed to the privileged class’ “red-brick” one (42). After the second World War, when Britain invited labour from its colonies, the first to respond were the Caribbeans who arrived from Jamaica at Tilbury in the ship The Empire Windrush in 1948, followed by Indians, Pakistanis, Sri Lankans and Bangladeshis. This marked the beginning of modern multi-racial culture in England, because the labourers never went back: instead, more of them and their families arrived in the erstwhile imperial headquarters to enjoy its “privileges”. However, it is not as though labour conditions would suddenly transform to become racially exploitative with the advent of migrants in the post-war scenario: in the 1960s post-Windrush phase, after the Caribbeans and Asian ex-colonial subjects settled in, race became one more problem added on to the already embittered British working class. Resistance came from the public by way of harrassment and violent attacks on Black and Asian workers at the workplace itself (Chandan 1986; Brah 2006).

**Job Opportunities Open To BrAsians.**

Chandan shows how in the 1950s and 60s, Asian emigrants worked in the places left vacant by the white British workers who left for “comparatively cleaner occupations” (39). Whether educated or not, BrAsian emigrants found jobs in the “textile industry, heavy engineering, canned food industries, the automobile industry,
public transport as well as service industries” (31). Nasreen’s father, (RB), Naina’s father (BI), Meena’s father (AM) and many other similar characters from the BrAsian novels and short stories found employment in these sectors in the 1960s and 70s, even 1980s. There were some changes in the employment scenario after the East African Asians arrived in the mid-60s, with a better educated, urban networking, financial background related to self-help and community support (Gidoomal 1997). Gradually, in the 1970s, more and more BrAsians, especially those from East Africa, ventured into networked small businesses, owning, partnering or managing garment-factories, food and grocery stores and food-processing factories (Gidoomal 1997). Most of them catered to the Asian clientele, but the newsagents and cornershops had clients from the mainstream as well. Though they were regarded as highly successful by mainstream observers and policy makers, Chandan (35-36) suggests otherwise, from studies done in Liverpool in 1985, and Gidoomal (1997), Anwar (1997) and Thandi (2006) also document through their research how this was not always the case. The cases of Chila’s and Tania’s parents (LI), Hari-jan’s and Ghazala’s parents (HJ), bring out the differential success rates of small enterprise in the BrAsian economy. Besides the working class, there were, and still are students and professionals, sojourners initially, who settled in Britain, raising the number of BrAsians in university towns along with the existing population in cities and industrial towns, like the Chatterjees and Durga and her husband (CCC), or the several educated upper class academicians in Sunetra Gupta’s novels are some cases in point. Engineers, accountants and doctors made up the large number of BrAsian professionals, all of whom faced discrimination in some measure in their early years, but decided to make Britain their home despite that. They and their children often faced unemployment, retrenchment or redundancy, and continue to do so, as a result of discrimination rather than genuine economic setbacks. The manufacturing sector has “continued to shed employment (over a third of a million jobs between 1991-9), as has the primary sector” (Thandi 213), and such examples are found in the short stories and The Red Box, written in the late 1980s and early 90s, which are both peopled with a large number of unemployed men and women. There has also emerged a new rise in female and part-time jobs at the same time, which has left the semi-skilled labourers marginalised further: for example, Nasreen’s mother (RB) finds full-time piece-work at home, whereas her father is facing retrenchment as a senior bus conductor, despite having a degree from Birkbeck College. Even the new ‘knowledge-based economy’ and employment opportunities in
the Information Technology and Communications sector has left the BrAsian male, semi-literate, semi-skilled, experienced industrial worker out of the pale. The so-called success of the BrAsian small businesses is marginal; BrAsian enterprise thrives on transnational contact and capital, the small corner shop owner provides vital services fighting competition from big stores as is happening worldwide (Thandi 229), and the novel Harijan finely illustrates this.

**Conditions Of The Workplace.**

The kinds of work performed by BrAsians, their work schedule, payment, benefits, food, place of residence and participation in resistance movements are described in detail by Chandan (1986). The average Asian emigrant in the 1950s and 60s was unskilled, having been landless peasants or partial owners and tillers of land, whose experience of work was largely rural, farm or agricultural experience. In Britain, such an emigrant “was employed in those sectors of industry in which sufficient and competitive investment had not been made” (Chandan 40), thus they faced old machines, poor working conditions like high levels of noise, chemical odours and long hours of work, low pay and yet more exhausting overtime.

**Need For Unionisation.**

The new additions to the already exploited white British working class workforce were the Black and the Asian, who were ready to work for less pay, and were not initially aware of unionisation. Their ability to do very hard work, for long hours, in extreme conditions and their willingness to perform any kind of labour brought in fear, suspicion and threat in the minds of the majority community (Brah 2006). The violent responses were as much racist in intent as prompted by the fear of losing jobs. The Asian labour force has been noted as being easily coerced, sincere and capable of surviving harsh conditions. The fact that they have survived for nearly fifty years now, has been attributed to their capacity to withstand adversity, their frugal habits, their tendency to overlook personal comfort and the support of their community (Chandan 1986, Ballard 1994, Thandi 2006 etc). Asians have by and large been docile and cooperative workers, though several instances of unionization and left-wing political participation gradually began, the records of which are now being uncovered (Chandan 1986, Visram 2002, Hutnyk 2006). Hutnyk (2006: 74-90) cites the examples of Saklatvala, Krishna Menon, Rajani Palme-Dutt and A. Sivanand in founding, consolidating and continuing left-wing political unions, initially among BrAsian mill and factory workers and seamen, from the 1920s to the present.
Chandan names the Indian Workers' Association (1938) and the Pakistani Workers' Association (1947), in which so many of the living relatives of the contemporary BrAsians were members, and the journals *Lalkar* (1967-), *Charcha, Lokta* etc which carried articles on issues relevant to British and international left-wing politics. Ever since the 1960s, there has been a proactive political participation among BrAsians as well as the desire to stay on, and reap the benefits of a “modern” society, to bring the families and keep the transnational network active (Ballard 2001). Over the decades, the BrAsian settlers have gradually minimised the transnational contact, as they have settled in Britain after dispelling the “myth of return”, and started adding to the wealth of the host nation by their labour, investment, entrepreneurship and capital (Gidoomal 1997).

4.2 **BrAsian Women’s Labour: Theory And Practice.**

To add to the family income, women joined the workforce, in addition to performing domestic labour. Chandan (1986) records how women’s activism in the mid 1970s lent support to the black worker’s tradition of protest against injustice: several times between 1977 and 1982 women workers went on strike, both for better working conditions and wages, and to lend support to male workers or anti-National front demonstrations. Chandan shows how unions were indifferent to and disinterested in solving their particular problems, till they “gradually dispelled the myth of their docility” (45), and started protesting despite family responsibility, the language barrier and notion of respectability. Chandan quotes Baljinder Singh, a strike leader at a Birmingham factory in which there was “no light in the loo, no heating system in the store, which was a pigstye infact (sic)” and a colleague had to work in the freezer in -3°C with no special clothing provided (46). Thus working class women’s labour was marked by discrimination and marginalisation, till they organised themselves and raised voices of protest, and though their support was recognised as important, there was little change in predominant attitudes to “women’s problems” in the industry, and it is still a contested area, though more and more BrAsian women are at present educated and better informed, aware of rights and discriminatory practice, and members of political organisations of various types (Takhar 2006).

It is important to understand how women’s labour is looked at by society in
general, in order to understand the particular nuances of the role of women's labour in Britain. Gayatri Spivak has been the most influential in offering a postcolonial, deconstructionist, feminist critique of the way women's reproductive and domestic labour is misread by society. From a feminist perspective, Spivak sees the Marxian framework as being insufficient in developing an understanding about the mode of production, use value, exchange value and surplus value in regards to the womb (155). She believes that the female body has been left out of the mode of production, and therefore does not gain the same esteem for the labor it endures. In the chapter, “Feminism and Critical Theory” in In Other Worlds: Essays in Cultural Politics (1987: 77-94), Spivak asks what the consequences of giving housework an exchange value would be on social relations and the female position within the family. She argues against the presumption that labourers are always separated from their products and that is the reason they feel alienated from society, because she sees this framework as leaving out one of the most fundamental and important relationships of the labourer to their production: that of the woman producing a child. Although she explains that child does not have an exchange value, she still considers the child to be a product of the woman's labour, even though the father claims “ownership” of the child as its legal custodian.

Spivak argues for a rereading of Marxism, that includes the female reproductive economies in her essay “Scattered Speculations on the Question of Value” (154-175). This, she believes will allow for a position from which women will be able to take claim to some of their labour which in most cases is neither valued, nor considered "real" labour. This is because, as Spivak shows, value, in capitalism, writes reproductive labour under erasure. Non-wage or reproductive labour is not recognizable as labour: it is not representable as work because it is not part of the system of capitalist exchange. Reproductive labour and the labour of women in the home are not given social meaning as labour. Non-waged labour, in other words, is seen as natural because it is associated with patriarchal notions of women’s gender roles and is, therefore, not seen as “productive”. When reproductive labour performed in the home is unrepresentable in capitalism, patriarchal cultural practices are linked to capitalist modes of production. Ideologies, which devalue or naturalize women’s work become part of the structure of exploitation through which capitalism extracts profit. However, the link between gender ideologies and labour practices is made socially invisible by the conflation of value with exchange value. Women’s work
within the family is not represented in capitalist patriarchy because work within the family is not readable as such. But it is very important to acknowledge that the domestic and reproductive labour of women makes capitalist productive labour possible. Non-wage labour, the reproductive labour that women perform maintaining the home, childcare, healthcare, allows waged labour to be productive. Men who work in factories, in the academy, and elsewhere can perform wage labour because they are supported by reproductive labour of women in the home (Rachel Riedner: 2002). The discussions in the texts show how BrAsian women’s reproductive and domestic labour gets erased out of statistics, surveys and socio-economic policy.

**BrAsian Women On The Job.**

In Britain, as the novels surveyed also show, most of the older, first-generation BrAsian female protagonists are compelled to take up jobs that would add to the family income quickly, rather than spend time on training for a career. Most of them then, are sweatshop workers, shop-attendants, or at the most clerks and desk-managers. Chandan adds to the list rightly, stating that women worked largely in the Asian-owned restaurants, sweatshops, factories and stores. These women are the mothers and aunts of the second-generation protagonists, women in the illegal, non-unionized third-world labour sector. Tariq Modood says to Shada Islam in an interview: “Many young people are reaping the fruits of their parents’ – the first-generation immigrants’ – hard work and labour” (1998: 46).

A large section of these women work in this statistically invisible sector to add to the family coffers, while retaining a vestigial dignity. Discussion of this sector is not commonly visible as in the economy of any other developed country. The government has funded several research projects about the women workers in the unorganized sector, and some sociologists have taken up a few projects, which have been referred to here as well (Anwar, Modood, Stopes-Roe etc.). These projects withhold not only the names of the employees but those of their employers also. Some of these projects centre round women employed in the randomly proliferating factories and tailoring shops, laundries and similar outfits. These employ women of Asian or African origin who are not part of any union, illiterate and do not often disclose their family’s identity to the employer and vice versa. Usually the owners of these sweatshops are Indian or Pakistani businessmen, who enjoy a social position on illegal earnings and exploitation of the poorer women of their community and other women from the third world. These women usually end up with tuberculosis or asthma, and are exploited as
much at home as well (Wilson 1979). The Commission for Racial Enquiry (CRE) funded a research study of sixteen Asian women suffering from depression, contacted through their hospital records, in 1989. The records show that some of these women were employed in this unorganized sector, and were overworked for example, Yasmin, (CRE 21 see section 4.3) which led to an increase in the malaise. Many, nearly all, of the texts chosen for study in the next two sections bear this out by reference to one or more characters who participate in such activities in some unauthorized factory or shop, while other texts discuss other professions taken up by the older, first generation woman of Indian origin.

It would again be wrong to state that all BrAsian women’s participation in labour is only limited to that in the factories of relatives or at home. This is true only of a certain class or a community of women, or those recently arrived, abandoned, untrained and impoverished, like Nalini (OHSW) and Vino (HSDY). In London, he adds, they worked in hospitals, laundries, food-processing industries, the Heathrow airport and the surrounding hotels. In contemporary Britain, the BrAsian working class woman is still found in such public places, in addition, they are found engaged in cleaning and attending the counters alongside Polish and East European women in the several services, alongside motorways, and doing private domestic work in upper-class Asian homes, and also providing child-care, ironing or catering from home.

Moreover, any homogeneous linkage of all BrAsian women’s labour with the working classes will completely ignore the economic contribution of an important segment, the educated, trained, skilled or employable woman of recently migrated middle or upper class families from South Asia or previously emigrated BrAsian communities. For example, among the middle-class BrAsian families portrayed in these novels, women usually take up teaching or are found managing departmental or other stores. The more talented are in the media, or become social researchers, lawyers or artists. BrAsians of the second-generation often opt to become sociologists and active social workers, whose interventions in public policy and community development are nowadays well-received. Earlier they bore the stigma of being “homebreakers” because of their support of, primarily, victims of domestic violence, as for example, the Southall Black Sisters were, as Julia Bard (1991: 196) analyses in a review of their first publication Against the Grain (SBS 1990). Some talented BrAsian women like Maya (OHSW), Nazneen and Razia in Brick Lane become designers, and Bhachu and others have analysed their success and commented upon
their entrepreneurial abilities and effective marketing skills (see Chapter Three section 3). Some of the protagonists are the wives of those working in the UK, and they are sometimes students or researchers, along with sojourners like Niharika (ASC). Many of the older, first-generation women portrayed are also homemakers who have elected to be so after childbirth. Needless to say, their labour, domestic and reproductive, goes to strengthen the community’s presence in the host country, but is unrecognised, as Spivak (1987) analyses while critiquing Marxist approach to women’s domestic and reproductive labour.

These are indeed the available career options in which Indian women are normally visible in the United Kingdom. These are also probably the safer; less challenging or threatening in terms of power, therefore the colour or race evaporates into the background to assume inconsequential positions. In fact, in some of the professions, as the texts portray, race becomes a so-called “advantage”, as race-related or ethnic issues are inevitably thrust upon these aspiring career women who could have dealt with the other vital, mainstream issues equally capably, like Tania (LI). While portraying this aspect of their protagonist’s lives, the authors have invariably woven in details from their own experiences, as they often share the careers of the women they write about. Many of the BrAsian women portrayed are also a part of unions, or political movements, or at least have the awareness of the need for unionisation or common political identities for themselves and their colleagues, (like Nargis Rashid in RB) though some are not (like Hari-jan’s aunt Binny). The authors portray the linkages between financial independence and class mobility, creativity and self-worth among the BrAsian working women, and how this affects their personal and community identity. The textual analysis attempts to shows how the BrAsian woman must not only negotiate her physical and cultural identity across the parameters of class, race, gender, religion etc., but also how she must take into cognizance essentialised notions of respectability, community identity, family aspirations towards upward mobility alongside discrimination and socio-political marginalisation. After all, her life is written into the patriarchal notion of family, which clearly demarcates between privileges of the male as an earner, and the female as undemanding provider of support, even in modern dual-earner families (Ramu 1989).

Strategies and Policies Against Discrimination.

Many researchers, both BrAsian and mainstream, examine discriminatory
practices, and some of them engage with survival strategies used by BrAsians in the workplace or in other spaces generating employment. A survey of the last ten years of such research reveals not much change, though heartening developments have taken place in government policy. Even though the Equal Opportunities Commission was established in 1975, so much of racial discrimination was and still is on board. Ten years ago, Ram Gidoomal, quotes from Tony Blair’s speech at the Labour Party conference in 1997 in Brighton, in which he speaks about discrimination against people of colour in British public life:

“We cannot be a beacon to the world unless the talents of all the people shine through. Not one black High Court judge/ chief constable/ permanent secretary/ army officer above the rank of colonel. Not one Asian either. Not a record of pride for the British establishment, ... so few black and Asian MPs. I am against positive discrimination. But there is no harm in reminding ourselves just how much negative discrimination there is.”(1997: viii).

Gidoomal seems to be encouraged by “how many are seeing the positive aspects of ethnic diversity as an asset rather than a liability”, when he analyses similar statements made by other public figures and policy makers also (1997: vii). As discussed later in the section, the recommendations of the Equal Opportunities Commission (2007) ten years later, seem to echo his thoughts on the benefits of ethnic diversity.

Muhammad Anwar (1997) gives an account of racial discrimination in the workplace and employment opportunities. He shows how “The overall pattern of employment for BrAsians has changed little in the last four decades: they are now more likely than white people to be unemployed” (54). Anwar says, qouting Labour Force Surveys in the early 1990s, “Therefore, although with higher qualifications one’s chances increase, racial inequality still remains an important contributory factor to these clear differences” (ibid). Throughout his book, Anwar maintains a clear distinction between the Indians, Pakistanis and Bangladeshis as distinct groups having discrete social and class affinities. He points out the differences between the generally more integrated, successful or high-earning, better educated migrants of Indian origin as opposed to the more deprived, less trained or educated, less assimilated other South Asians in Britain. Some of the texts do bear this out, directly or indirectly, whereas others try to negate these dichotomies and offer new, hybrid versions of promising talent from women of Bangladeshi, Pakistani, Sri Lankan or Indian origin.
Shada Islam writes with a similar emphasis, commenting on the strength of the community that thrives against prejudice, rather than its persecution by racist policy and practice: “Ambitious young Asians are moving from the margins of British society into the mainstream” (1998: 46). She also says that: “A new breed of self-confident and successful British Asians run thriving businesses, harbour political ambitions and work in the entertainment and design industries. They may still be a minority but their impact is wide” (ibid.).

Lord Bhikhu Parekh gives examples of “negative equality”, at employment, that policy-making bodies like the Commission for Racial Equality should look into. He points out that rules like policemen should be six feet tall, or that a candidate for an academic post should have his/her first degree within the country discriminates against certain races, and immigrants in general. If these inequalities are not addressed, “highly prized areas of life run the risk of becoming the unmerited preserves of a particular community, with the consequent alienation and exclusion of the rest” (2000: 210).

Roger Ballard shows how drawing of transnational cultural capital enables entrepreneurs from “below”, from Pakistani, Indian and Bangladeshi villages to establish themselves in Britain’s metropolitan centres; how these take “advantage of the radically superior material opportunities available in that context” (2001: 46); and how these may be entrenched in future by endogamy and newer possibilities which defy easy prediction (47). Thus, the wide variety of opinion on migrant labour and capital mobilisation indicates the strong presence of BrAsians as worthy members of the labour force who must be taken seriously by the British Government and the public.

Parminder Bhachu (2003) examines the impact women are making as economic and cultural agents using racialised, political, and cultural aesthetics while they assert their agendas in new capitalist economies. She has professionally monitored the proliferating economy of the salwaar kameez industry in Britain for a decade, and finds that BrAsian women in the 1990s have made new economic spaces in global markets. Bhachu speaks of the locally born and raised fashion entrepreneurs; the “suit” marketers who transfer them from South Asian locations; the home-based seamstresses who tailor against payment from a variety of clients, and finally, domestic producers, who, in the 1960s and 70s, kept the “suit” economy alive (147-148). She specially mentions Gita Sarin and Bubby Mahil as influencing and
contesting mainstream markets “through their highly politicized cultural agendas encoded in their culturally encoded commercial sites” (156).

Nirmal Puwar and Parvati Raghuram (2003: 1-10) state in their introductory essay that South Asian women are seen and not heard in the academy; and “how they have been ‘placed’ within melodramatic constructions and postures in the academy” (12). Puwar argues in her essay (2003: 21-41) how BrAsian women are seen only as “heroic cogs in wheels” (28) with reference to their labour in the sick textile industry of England which provoked them to agitate, waving banners in their saris, romantic visions of “heroines who are fighting the system ” (ibid). She also adds that western academics congratulate themselves in saving these women from marginality by recognising their labour, but that view becomes fossilised, essentialised as BrAsian women are finally seen as powerless, lacking agency, needing recognition and rescue by Western feminists, and it is this kind of essentialisation that needs to be corrected.

Raghuram, in her article in the same book (2003: 67-85), partially fulfils such a function when she locates agency in the BrAsian entrepreneur, Malini, the chief procurer and marketing-in-charge of a private limited company selling salwaar kameez to upper-class English and BrAsian buyers. She talks about production and consumption as the twin aspects of the intersectionality of migrancy, marginality, gender, class, race and culture: Malini procures clothes produced in India, for upper and middle-class women who have migrated from India, and continue to wear their cultural dress, despite marginalisation, despite its inavailability, which she herself as a “producer” of sorts, makes available to them, and to the English women who earlier otherised Indian women as “Pakis” in salwaar kameez, but now wear them “especially at Christmas time” (78). With 41 employees in the UK, an office in India, subcontractors in China and India, she exports her clothes to Mauritius, South Africa, America and retail outlets in Europe, from India, as the “duties are too high in Britain” (77). Thus, fighting marginalisation, Malini turns into a corporate entity across the trans-nation, and any consumer across time-spaces can obtain her products for a price: this is an example of production and consumption against all odds, as Raghuram suggests.

Thandi’s (2006: 211-229) contemporary, broad-based account supports Anwar’s basic thesis that BrAsian “success” is actually a limited phenomenon of small businesses growing into large empires; the average BrAsian businessman remains inscribed by racial stereotyping and segregation in contemporary Britain.
Thandi provides contemporary facts and figures through graphs and pie-diagrams (214; 215; 222), which are relevant to a later period than most of the texts delineate, but she relates them to the earlier background, so her account offers a useful comparative position of the BrAsian labour market and BrAsian businesses, past and present.

The Equal Opportunities Commission (EOC) in a press release in March 2007 (EOC 2007 www.eoc.org.uk) finds Black and Asian women facing penalties at the workplace, based on its two year study Moving on Up: Ethnic Minority Women at Work. Also called a Black and Ethnic Minority Report (BME 2007), it is the largest investigation of its kind in Great Britain. It has for the first time, formally established that Pakistani, Bangladeshi and Black Caribbean women face significantly greater penalties than white women in the workplace. The EOC is urging Britain’s employers and policy makers to address and tap the diversity of modern Britain. The study shows how, between 2001 and 2020, ethnic minority people are expected to account for over 70% of the growth in the UK employable population, that is people aged 16-59. With Britain’s employers facing skills shortages, it is crucial to employ a growing and increasingly well-qualified pool of young Pakistani, Bangladeshi and Black Caribbean women to maintain economic growth. And with access to jobs being a key ingredient of community cohesion, policy makers will fail to build stronger communities unless black and Asian women’s skills and ambitions translate into better-paid jobs in a wider range of organisations. Jenny Watson, Chair of the Ceo said, “Time after time women told us about the ‘unwritten rules’ in their workplace, hidden barriers that prevent them from realising these ambitions. Without tackling these unwritten rules, change will never come” (EOC 2007). The investigation has pointed to practical solutions, suggested by employers, mostly multi-national companies, who have been applying them for many years in order to compete in multicultural contexts. The ten suggested solutions are addressed to employers, majority community employees at the workplace and the government, to deal with diversity as a resource, and not as a threat or a problem that resides outside the workplace. BrAsian writers are trying to do the same in their representation of women who are like them; they wish to showcase the immense potential of the BrAsian women in all fields, so that she can finally call Britain her ‘home’, and not to have to glance backwards at India except notionally.

The EOC press release suggests that employers and policy makers must
develop "cultural intelligence" - the awareness, understanding and confidence to communicate and relate positively to people from different cultural backgrounds, to get the best from them at work and design policy that meets their needs" (EOC 2007). The 42 page report supported by research data compiled over two years from over a thousand employers employing at least 25 women, interviews, theoretical inputs from Black, Asian and white British scholars, strongly recommends that government policy also needs to meet the needs of a new generation of ethnic minority women. “Rather than focusing on young women themselves gaining additional skills, or tackling a resistance to women from some communities working outside the home, our investigation suggests that better careers advice at school and into adulthood, more work experience choices, and help with childcare costs for larger families would be of the most practical benefit”, the EOC Chairperson Jenny Watson adds (EOC 2007).

Reading the report (BME 2007), one finds glaring inconsistencies in employment participation among Black and Asian educated, trained, experienced women as opposed to white British women, further gaps in unemployment ratios, career progression, differential payment and segregation both at work and the kinds of employment found by these women as opposed to white British women. The Report highlights unsupportive workplace culture as a part of the “danger zones” at work. It gives examples from real life situations which are very similar to the number of such references in the texts about to be studied, like unpleasant questions regarding ethnic or religious practices, family life, socialising at pubs, smoking or drinking, dress etc. The report says that “over 30 years of race and sex discrimination legislation” (BME 2007: 29) has led to so much of disproportionate levels of employment disadvantage, and that proportionate participation in senior management happens “Only in health and social work/personal services” (33). The work of Muhammad Anwar and the comments of Ram Gidoomal mentioned earlier seem to be relevant even in 2007, though there is visible policy change in high places, where BrAsians and Black women have been able to exert some influence now.

To sum up, BrAsian entrepreneurship is by and large successful, but not compulsorily so: niche markets like the clothing trade are skilfully managed by BrAsian women, but other employments have their own limitations; discrimination and marginalisation of both men and women in employment continue in all sectors of British public life despite diversity policies. There are gradual efforts, like the BME
report, towards improvements in the exercise of these policies in Britain, and there is hope that things will improve with intervention from BrAsian women’s organisations. The texts studied here also reveal supportive and more interesting realities, unavailable in sociological surveys.

Modernity And BrAsian Women’s Labour.

The need for financial security, the desire for modernity, and the pressures of an increasingly consumer culture were the three main reasons for BrAsian women to enter the labour market (Wilson 1978; Chandan 1986; Brah 1996; West and Pilgrim 1994). South Asian scholars generally find the consumer boom a distraction away from the “higher” goals of life, an entrapment into economic slavery and exploitation. Just as in India, or South Asia in general, the rise of late modernism was signalled by television and the media’s proliferation of images of consumer goods which signalled economic prosperity (Mankekar 1999), so even in Britain, both men and women were drawn to the lure of consumerism during this period, which still continues. To the South Asian nations, after the mid-1980s, postcolonial modernity became increasingly articulated in terms of consumerism under the transnational flows of capital and media. Although the practice of demanding large dowries existed before liberalization and the advent of commercials on television in South Asia, women’s groups, social scientists, and journalists all believe that television commercials, certainly a western influence, whetted people’s appetites for such consumer durables because “consumerism itself became an index of modernity” (Mankekar 48).

For a transnational community like the BrAsians, the influence of this new consumer boom in India was secondary, but an important influence, no doubt, added to the increasing materialism of British society (Gidoomal 1997: 187; Shiach 1997). Very peculiarly, transnational contact has kept alive the flamboyance of South Asian weddings, which are exhibitions of wealth and conspicuous consumption internationally, mention of which is found in at least two of the texts, “The Bamboo Blind” (FS 1994), Hari-jan (1992). Dowry is not an essential but often camouflaged or even negotiated component, and there are hardly any discussions in the texts on this subject, except briefly in Sumitra’s Story and “War of the Worlds” (RW).

Some mainstream feminists scholars like Mica Nava, similar to BrAsian researchers like Bhachu and Jhutti, also find the interest in or ability to negotiate in financial matters among western women enabling, and not a slavish desire for material things. The desire for consumables sets the mind free, creating an aura of
freedom or boosting of the self-image, a “feel-good” experience that is a precondition of feminine agency (Nava 1999). Thus for many BrAsian women, joining the workforce might have been a good experience of staying temporarily free of household chores and restrictive domestic environments (Day CRE 1989: 21-22; Wilson 1978), whilst others felt pressures of exclusion at the workplace due to language and cultural problems, like food, dress, social habits, drinking, smoking, visiting pubs etc (Wilson 1978; Brah 1996). On the whole, feminist scholars agree that the positive impact of globalisation has allowed women to be considered a sizeable skilled force to be exploited by nations and their economies, though that implicates them into the project of capitalism. Their visibility in the labour force has turned the balance in gender roles somewhat: it saw women represented in policy-framing for women, rather than men deciding how to control the economics of women’s labour. Though this has not brought in any new sense of equality than before, it has brought some positive changes in women’s identity (Steans 2003: 125-126).

**Contemporary Trends In Theorising Working Women.**

These new identities relate to larger issues in theorising BrAsian women’s positions, and it is necessary to discuss the prevalent currents of thought in theoretical debates on these issues. Modern life-styles and homes, with the comfort of convenient gadgets, gardens and terraced houses, children going to private schools were and still are the desires of the BrAsian middle-class. This, in fact, is what characterizes today’s middle-classes all over the world, and the dangers of such material aspiration are that they are in an absolute disconnect with public life. The highly successful middle-classes of the world are so preoccupied with consumerism and its distractions that they do not, on an average, aspire to political activity, high positions in the civil services or army, nor better rights and facilities for the community or the nation, nor for the women, who are instrumental in contributing to the community’s identity in such a cognizable manner. The same consumerist pattern follows in BrAsian society. Domestic violence is only referred to in *AWOW, Bhaji on the beach, Life isn’t...*, but emotional torture is described in many cases. The BrAsian woman is threatened by abandonment and betrayal, which exposes her to emotional, if not physical torture, and reinserts her into a dependent, helpless victim position the West likes to see her in (Takhar 2003; Ramji 2003; Puwar and Raghuram 2003). The BrAsian woman is, in the 1980s, 1990s and now, in the 21st century, more than ever,
caught in newer hegemonies of power, which keep changing from time to time. Raymond Williams says that hegemony refers to a “whole lived social process as practically organized by specific and dominant meanings and values” (Williams 1977: 109). Moreover, hegemony is always renewed, modified, and re-created whenever oppositional forces challenge it. It is a mark of the strength of these resisting forces that they contain within them “indicative features of what the hegemonic process has in practice had to work to control” (113). Thus hegemonic forces in British society constantly change, and the BrAsian woman struggles to oppose these forces with renewed aspects of strength in her own inner resources, or taking the support of others, within or outside the community. This instability of hegemonic societal forces is what this thesis aims to portray in the following analysis: it is not only racism or sexism, it is not only parental control or community pressures, there are newer forces which complicate modern existence, which must be acknowledged to make sense of the changing socioeconomic aspects of the diaspora.

Gayatri Spivak, in *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason* (1999) discusses “Culture”, and criticises the role of the diaspora academic and the migrant diasporics of non-Europe, who now constitute the European middle-class, and are complicit in the project of upward mobility and international division of labour, both of which reinforce the discrimination between indigenous peoples of the third world, and migrants from the same locations in the metropolitan centres. She is also interested in the position of the third world academician at the centres of academic studies in the West, who do not only distance themselves from activism or resistance, but also often speak in the name of the subaltern, perpetuating the asymmetries of geopolitical power. Thus she says that with the emergence of the diasporic intellectuals, “Both the racial underclass and the Subaltern South step back into the penumbra” (361). She wishes for a model of “ethical singularity” (384) to be followed, in which the diaspora academic may engage in hands-on social or community work, going back to the rural areas of the third world, and not merely engage in group action in the West, as “behalfists” of the third world resistance movements. She gives the example of the Narmada movement, which has many supporters in the western academia whom she is very sceptical of, though she praises the work of local activists in it (415). Her own work in the grassroots level among aboriginals in West Bengal, speaks of what she means by ethical singularity.

The issue is, all diaspora women are not intellectuals, nor are they all able to
find voices to resist hegemony. Moreover, can all academics, intellectuals who are women, participate in such activism, or is it not their task to dismantle myths about inequality and victimhood or demolish negative stereotypes about third world women, often underprivileged and from rural areas, who are brought in to the west for their reproductive, domestic and physical labour? The aim of “ethical singularity” is thus the same, its additional parameters of resistance being that of race and privilege of the west, though all other discriminatory factors like class, gender, colour remain the same, except perhaps caste.

Most of the British-born women writers also participate in several types of cultural and social activism: their linkages with the Southall Black Sisters and the Black British film movements have been documented in the earlier chapters, while this chapter shows their relationship with the labour market, which constructs them along their race, ethnicity and gender. All BrAsian women are not free agents, they are subjected to discrimination of several types like their transnational sisters or mothers, and the BrAsian community does exercise a lot of control, especially with the rise of fundamentalism and religious excesses among Hindus, Muslims and Sikhs of the diaspora (Werbner 2004). BrAsian women writers are a part of this socio-cultural scanario, and through their work, they maintain their attitude of opposition and protest. They seek agency for themselves as much as their fictional characters, through the gendered geographies of power, often the impact of the cultural logic of late capitalism.

The objective of this analysis is to demonstrate that by scrutinising the relationship between mass media, social practice, and representation, literary research from non-western academia can measure women’s experience both against hegemonic forces in highly unequal societies, and such academic research which often reiterates these inequalities. It is a measure of the strength of the fictitious portrayals of women in these texts, that they free themselves from inequal and subservient positions repeatedly, rising like the phoenix from the ashes of their lost self-worth, to redeem dignity and reclaim selfhood to create new icons of liberation for fellow BrAsians. Portrayals of strong women in these texts can, like the true story of Kiranjeet Ahluwalia add new dimensions to their often-misconstrued identity as dependent, meek, submissive victims needing rescue, or as hyperactive hybrids. It is appropriate literary critique of BrAsian women's fiction that can address such dimensions of change.
4.3 Probing Into Portrayals Of Women's Labour.

A closer look at the texts under examination will reveal the manifestations of these new identities of BrAsian working women emerging as survivors rather than victims, especially in the workplace, and in other social spaces like the public and the private spaces.

The most significant reading of these texts is in terms of charting a map of the relative degree of empowerment of these BrAsian women in different sectors of labour from the sixties and seventies, through the eighties, nineties and the first five years of the new century. When considered as a body of work produced in a chronological sequence, the texts offer remarkably bold assertions of selfhood in the older generation of protagonists, and an unlimited vitality in the lives of the younger. The picture these novels draw of working women describe their domestic labour; labour in factories or laundries; piecework done at home; working in or managing stores; clerical work or teaching in schools; research, both academic and media, the law, art, creative writing and social work.

**Domestic Labour: The Question Of ‘Value’.

Domestic responsibility demands a lot of the BrAsian woman’s labour, and it is often taken for granted, ignored or undermined by the rest of the family. Hari-jan’s father, Sumitra’s father, Nina Savani’s (BI) father are all found reading the newspaper, watching television or chatting with BrAsian friends in the living room, while the girls’ mothers are busy cooking, cleaning, washing up after coming back from the store or factory where they work. Nalini (OHSW) who is a single mother for most of the fictional time, finds a lot of help from her little sympathetic children, (see Chapter Two section 2.2) as do Ammi, Kurshid’s mother, but Tara (T), Vino (HSDY), Kavitha (BI) or Mrs.Patel, Sumitra’s mother, do not find help from their children unless they demand it. Whenever the children of the upper or middle-class families seem to have internalised a lot of western influences, they turn a blind eye to the mother’s hard domestic labour, even though she may also be otherwise employed. If the children help, it is after a lot of rebuke from the mother, and they sometimes do not hesitate to demand neatness and order at home from their overburdened mothers.

In Transmission (T 206-207) we find little about Angie’s mother Tara’s career by the narrator. It seems as if it was insignificant to Angie that her mother Tara came
home tired from work at the Natwest, wearing the “sari that had messed up in the rush hour” (206), but what mattered to her more was that she did not care to clean up the house. Tara’s poor domestic performance is, strangely not a matter of concern for her husband and brother, the other males in the house, but for Angie, the grown-up daughter, a television and film-researcher, who is so conscious of her own independence, and freedom from such a routine. Though not teenagers, twenty-five year old Angie and her younger brother Rax demonstrate bratty behaviour rather than adult maturity. Tara really encourages and supports her daughter in her whimsical choice of career, even though it may be unconventional and daring, and allows her to slip past guests during Diwali. Angie confesses that “Whatever she said, I knew ma was all for me having a career and was well proud that I worked so hard. Sometimes I thought I’d hate to tell her I could take it or leave it” (T 66). Angie, like some of the other BrAsian girls in the texts, builds her independence on her mother’s labour, but she does not even have any sympathy for her mother. She totally rejects her own share in the domestic work, helping only in making rotis when her mother demands. Angie’s collusion with alleged patriarchal attitudes to the domestic labour of her mother is even alien to her family: neither her uncle nor her father are really bothered about Tara’s disinterest or inability to keep the house clean. Though Angie hardly helps around the house, she is not even very serious about her career sometimes: she says she “didn’t care badly enough about it” as there were no “bills to worry about” and that “sometimes work felt like a fashion accesory” (30). This kind of attitude springs from a deep-seated bias against domestic work that the younger generation develops if respect for such work is not instilled early. This phenomenon is observed in many of the texts as mentioned earlier, and the fact that the authors represent the sympathy of the daughters who comment on this (SS), or occasionally satirise the pictures of their mothers’ domestic labour (BI) suggests debates on the extent of domestic labour in BrAsian homes among the two generations, as happens in Sumitra’s case (see Chapter Two section 2.2).

Meena’s father, very loving and kind towards his wife, is also not participative in domestic chores, he too watches the television and reads the paper outside the domestic space, in the living room. One of the most poignant portrayals of the BrAsian woman who is overworked at home and outside is that of Meena’s mother, who does belong to a higher class than even her neighbours, is suitably employed as a teacher but is just as burdened with household chores and children. She
is found sitting and staring into empty space one day with her son on her chest, totally shaken by the effort to maintain a traditional Indian domestic routine, a career and two children to look after.

“Daljit, what is wrong? Tell me please,” Papa said gently.
Mama could not tear her eyes away from the window, as if she was counting the stars in her head. “I can’t cope any more, Shyam. Back home I would have sisters, mothers, servants...” The stars were her family, his family, she was crossing them off one by one, naming them to keep them alive. “I can’t do this any more. I can’t.” (AM 196)

Meena’s Nanima has to come all the way from India to take charge of the child and help out at home, and again, it is her support and the solidarity of the community and family, that sustains Meena’s mother through the crisis.

Sunetra Gupta’s novel A Sin of Colour, shows how even a white British woman Jennifer, who marries a BrAsian man Debendranath, gets coopted into the cycle of domestic performance, financial support and care, even without proportionate commitment from her husband, or his neice Niharika. Jennifer studied librarianship through a correspondence course: she was no Oxford scholar, she was an ordinary middle-class woman, not particularly beautiful, but kind and supportive, submissive and caring. Later, after her husband, a scholar and professor at Oxford disappeared, she was left to her own devices. She took over her aunt’s Bed & Breakfast and made a career of that. Her life, her choice of profession, and her latter-day occupation are in stark contrast to the aristocratic Debendranath and his erudite, upper-class neice, whom she loves and looks after when she comes to study at Oxford. When her husband reappears, blind and in need of care, she looks after him to the best of her capabilities, and they do share a measure of camaraderie, but it is not really the happiest of marriages. Jennifer’s labour gets undermined over and over again: her simplicity and sincerity are taken for granted. Figuratively, Debendranath never “sees” her, but uses her labour as his husbandly prerogative, of course with her consent and unembittered commitment. Moreover, Jennifer’s genuinely affectionate claims over Niharika are often rebuffed, apparently for busy study schedules, but she does feel slighted, knowing that these are mere excuses. Thus it is the South Asian man and his neice who exploit the domestic labour, the love and affection of the white British woman, Jennifer, who exists in an unequal bonding with them. This turning of the tables reveals a strange commonality in the way domestic labour and care are undermined even in western metropolitan locations, and especially among upper-class,
educated people.

**Work In Factories.**

Working class women definitely find either more active help and sympathy among their children, in terms of housework and their outwork, or at least guilt and regret for their indifference, which may be regretfully acknowledged at a later stage of the protagonist’s lives. Some of the texts do analyse the actual manner of exploitation of the Asian workers in the unorganized sector, whereas others only offer scattered hints, because the mothers of the protagonists reveal so little about their working lives to the family. The texts by authors of Indian origin have the narrator or protagonist mentioning her mother’s work in a factory by the way, or, recall the trauma associated with it as a temporary phase from which she had moved ahead with guilty memories. One such text is *Life isn’t...* (2000) by Meera Syal which shows Tania, one of the trio of the second-generation protagonists, who openly says that her mother “donated most of her lungs to the laundry where she’d worked to feed her family” (*LI* 42), and died of asthma. Tania always grudged any housework given to her, and yet was sensitive to the fact that her mother’s labour was unrecognized in the household and the father was to be looked up as the provider who worked so hard. Tania’s sympathy for her mother surfaced only after her death, and she feels guilty and regrets her earlier indifference to her mother. Tania’s entire narrative is marked with a humour, which is so self-deprecating and English, the hallmark of Meera Syal’s writing right from her first novel *Anita and Me*, that she sees her mother as essentially funny and helpless as well. She mocks her mother’s subservience to her father and wishes she had been less scared and more assertive “...it made me sick, watching my mother contort herself to bolster my father’s fragile ego” (144). Thus the lives of BrAsian women of the older generation are marked by indifference not only from the establishment, from the menfolk in the community, from the exploitative market and other patriarchal institutions, but also, and often, from their own daughters who take the fruits of their labour for granted. Theorisation needs to speak about these webs of inequality within the larger structure of power in BrAsian society, of which the educated and “empowered” daughter and the subservient, exploited mother are only two parts.

The other story, “Cassandra and the Viaduct” by Rukhsana Ahmad has even more overt references to the mother’s outwork and the family’s response, and the
daughter’s relationship with the mother and their cultural gap. Qaiser prefers to be called Cass, even Cassandra, and goes to study at a London school, where she makes friends with Marilyn, a white girl, rather than any from her own community. Qaiser’s mother worked as a part-time dinner lady, and she had to leave her job when they left Derby for London. When she wanted to join Mr. Hussain, her husband, at his shop, “he was quite blunt with his refusal” (FS 46). He said to her:

“It’s got to look professional, Tara. If the place is full of Pakis it won’t impress the customers. They’ll think of us as a load of crooks, out to fleece them, without spending anything on overheads. I want a white girl to do the shopfront. Looks less tacky, you know what I mean.”

“Well, I can learn typing and shorthand, but I don’t know how to change the colour of my skin,” she said. (ibid)

Mrs. Hussain speaks “more wistfully” while speaking about her job at Derby which gave her some financial freedom. She says, remembering the little financial agency she had earlier enjoyed, “I miss my little job in Derby. I used to have a bit of money to spend on little, little things, for the house, for myself and Qaiser, you know” (ibid) Qaiser admitted to herself that “She was right of course, I had noticed the difference myself: one just had to wait longer for things one needed” (ibid), after her mother had left her job. Without “even an ounce of graciousness”, her father points out how she used to send things “home” with some of the money she earned, and Mrs. Hussain replies, with an intention of pointing out different world views of those raised in Bradford as opposed to subcontinental upbringing. She tells him:

“Sometimes, yes. One has to. I grew up in a world where you always exchanged presents and gifts, people enjoyed spending on others. No one just keeps what you give them you know, gifts do come back, one way or the other. Hoonh! What would you have known of all this in Bradford?” (ibid).

Mr. Hussain was really very defensive about his identity as a self-made Asian businessman raised in Bradford, as he wanted to be an engineer, whereas Mrs. Hussain was apparently assimilative, cultivating friendships with her white peers at work, and yet adopting attitudes that would free her, rather than bind her to her given social status as a Pakistani businessman’s wife in London. Perhaps this was what her husband resented. So, in response to her taunt about lavishing gifts on her relatives, he offered her the real reason for his refusal to let her work. Hussain wanted her to work somewhere, which would add to, not take away from his position in society as a
successful, self-employed businessman “something that fits your position in life now” (46). Her employment could not be related to her wishes, abilities or desires; it had to be incumbent on his wish, his image, his newly restored respectability after he opened an electrical repair shop.

She looked at him without saying anything. I never could make out what that inscrutable look was... For she never really looked bitter or cross or bitter in that mood, expressed in an impossible circular nod of the head, which was a “yes” and a “no” rolled into one. She merely looked ever so slightly, ruffled. (ibid)

Qaiser notes how they had to acquiesce whenever her father wished to do anything. “Basically, when dad said we had to move, we knew we would have to, whether we liked it or not. We were that kind of family. In any case, Mama always said that that’s how she likes things to be, and if anyone did notice or comment on how Dad always had his way, she got kind of defensive” (45). Thus Qaiser’s mother’s obvious desire to stand by her husband, find her own limited financial agency are thwarted by her husband himself. She herself could not correct this inequality of power in their relationship due to her conditioning, and Qaiser’s attitude to her mother, of belittling her orders, laughing at her wrong English, is also born out of such a disparagement of her position of authority.

Later, Mr. Hussain’s infidelity is revealed. Hussain not only abuses his wife’s position as docile, obedient companion, he also betrays her sexually, morally, by groping his daughter’s friend at the shop. Marilyn, Cass’ friend, is already shown as a sexually active youngster with a preference for older men; her entry into the Hussain household had been engineered by her best friend Cass herself. In the pretext of working for Mr. Hussain, she engages in sexual contact with him, and she had earlier shown signs of intimacy with him in Quaiser’s absence. The sexual contact between young Marilyn and the older Mr. Hussain seems to justify Bhabha’s argument related to the third space, “It is actually very difficult, even impossible and counterproductive, to try and fit together different forms of culture and to pretend that they can coexist” (cited in Kain 2002: 244). The scar of this event will perhaps be an indelible barrier to Qaiser’s own sexual behaviour, and further obedience and respect for her father seems questionable, though her mother will probably never know about her husband’s betrayal. Qaiser somehow becomes complicit in betraying her mother, by introducing her friend Marilyn to her father, as well as being guilty of ignoring her mother, as shown in Chapter Three section 3.4.
In a later novel, Ravinder Randhawa’s *Coral Strands* (2001), Sita remembers also what she often sees in the mornings to work:

... she passed the muffled thunder of machines behind walls, or walked over sections of pavement that vibrated under her feet. Once she had paused by a tiny open window, looking into a room crowded with heat and the clamour of machines; at bent heads, hands moving swiftly backwards and forwards. A thin young man, already worn old, had glanced up, their eyes grazed across each other’s, then his back bent to their work. (20)

Randhawa is aware of the underbelly of London’s Asian life as well, so Sita, her heroine, looks at this poor young man working in the sweatshop partially hidden from public eye with recognition, with awareness of shared sorrows. In this novel, where she constantly pits the rich and the poor, the upper and the lower classes, “high” and “low” birth, Randhawa’s Sita has known hunger and poverty from close quarters, and so she stops to notice things she would not be associated with in her successful career in art, or the middle-brow society to which she belongs. As an immigrant of the newer generations, she is a success: a victim once, almost a slave, she strives to achieve her own agency in the span of the novel, remembering her disempowered past occasionally. This passage also shows how unemployed young men are driven to work in the sweatshops: it is not only poor third world emigrants but also young men who, sitting in front of the machine in the cold air filled with lint, become thin and worn out before their time.

The contemporary setting of the following novel actually highlights continual and repetitive exploitation of third world women in the metropolitan spaces of the west and the subcontinent, and yet locates corporal and cognitive agency in these gendered geographies of power. Even though Preethi Nair’s novel *One hundred shades of White* (2003) deals with a young, modern designer as a protagonist, there is a chronological progression of the story of her life from the early days, as in a *Bildungsroman*. So the experience of isolation of her mother Nalini’s early days after immigration is invaluable in our understanding of how that shaped Maya’s life. Her colleagues at the tailoring factory frown upon Nalini, a new entrant there, because she dresses differently, or does not affiliate herself to any of the groups to avoid politics. As a large body of sociological research shows, there is exploitation, cruelty, misbehaviour from the employer, white in this case, but this text records here what sociologists
cannot often fathom. This text speaks about the exclusion practiced on women by their own countrywomen, Indians from North India against one from the South, as in this case:

I didn’t affiliate myself to any of the groups at the factory, pretending not to understand the broken English, avoiding the politics this way. Every group had its leader and issues. Instead of uniting against the same cause, they all fought non-stop. The other Indian ladies pretended to be proud and snubbed me or made comments when I passed, perhaps this was because I was from the South or because I was new or wore western clothes. I feigned ignorance at every opportunity...(96)

This did not deter Nalini from working hard and buying whatever she could for the children. Perhaps Nalini ignored this as a strategy against herding, for which she saw no point, nor had any time, and she did not care that “the supervisor, a rake-shaped woman, (who) would stab me in the shoulder with a pen” (91) if she was caught daydreaming, or that Mr. Humphries did not pay her dues when she left at short notice. Nalini is more frightened of the larger picture, of the loss of joy and freedom that piecework in a factory implies. She records, like Farhana Sheikh (RB), the strict time-schedule maintained by the factory which left very little free time for the women to socialize, and yet they did, “cackling” all the time they were together. Working from eight to six every day, these women, Irish or Polish, Pakistani or Indian, were of different cultural affiliations. But she also records how, as only a perceptive observer can, that they “looked defeated, old and disheveled” though only in their forties or fifties. She felt lucky to escape this by starting her own enterprise; otherwise she fears that:

I would have done nothing except that which was familiar – stitch skirts and take abuse from people who believed that they were better than me. It would show on me like it did on those women; rugged lines of sadness so deeply etched on their faces that they forgot how to smile. (96)

Nalini’s experience highlights the plight of immigrant women of all kinds of nationalities getting embittered due to long hours of work, poor pay and loss of respect and self-esteem due to the rude behaviour of the employers (91). The text then takes a positive step forward, in which Nalini is helped to start her pickles factory, like Rushdie’s Salim Sinai does in Midnight’s Children (1981), by the social outcast Maggie, a streetwalker, and her “brother” Tom, as well as her two children.

Nina Savani (BI) blandly and guiltlessly reports that in the evening her mother made “perfectly circular rotis” and that “During the day she worked at a tailor’s and
sometimes took home extra work making Indian garments”, and that her father, for twenty years since 1972, had been a bus conductor on the same route (BI 29). Nina, on the other hand, had become a lawyer, and was embarking upon a career in art without her parents’ knowledge.

Some of the texts by authors of origins other than Indian, do analyse the actual manner of exploitation of the Asian workers in the unorganized sector, whereas others only offer scattered hints, because the mothers of the protagonists reveal so little about their working lives to the family. One such text is Sumitra’s Story (1985), which often refers to Sumitra’s mother’s plight at work, though the emphasis of the author’s gaze is on her daughter’s rebellion against her family. A small segment of the novel deals with the plight of Mai, seen through her daughter’s eyes. Mai, a recently migrated Ugandan Asian woman, originally a Gujarati Patel, is always struggling to meet both the demands of domesticity and outwork, as well as bearing the pangs of cultural and physical acclimatization. She does not belong to any union or does not enlist organizational support. Sumitra’s mother faces the added trauma of going to work to a place where she cannot belong because of her lack of English, and comes back totally exhausted physically. She also fears racism and the loss of respectability as she works outside the house and the mental strain of her sense of her compromised dignity tells on her. This kind of experience is referred to by Chandan (1986: 45) and West and Pilgrim (1995: 363). When her mother returns home, however, Sumitra or her sisters give her comfort. Even though they are also tired after work or school, they make tea for the maladjusted mother who is tired and frustrated with her life, the compulsion to work in a factory, the piles of unattended domestic work that she had to complete, take care of the husband and the children, relatives and guests.

Sumitra knew Mai was unhappy and tired. She had found a job in a shoe factory in Enfield, which employed Asian women at inferior rates. She left home each morning at 7.30 and arrived home in the evening after the long bus-ride. There were the girls to attend to and her husband to pacify. Weekends were a busy rush of cooking, cleaning, temple-going, visiting or entertaining. And there was always this other thing to contend with, the fear, the hostility, the knowledge of which lay somewhere in the back of the head, pressing down coldly, debilitating. Mai went to lie down. Sumitra took her a cup of tea, tidied up the kitchen and went into the lounge. (SS 75-76)

This gesture was the only reward her mother got from Sumitra. But despite her sympathy for her mother, despite the fact that it was her mother’s extra income that

224
supported her education, little outings or better lifestyle than before, Sumitra does not help her mother to achieve agency by her own active intervention and leaves her to fulfil her own dreams.

A powerful text, written by an author of Sri Lankan origin, Shyama Perera, is Haven’t Stopped Dancing Yet by (1999), which offers a suitable contrast to Sumitra’s Story. Mala Fonseka and her mother were abandoned by her father who left them “unprepared, inexperienced and broken-hearted in a cold country where the smog confused our eyes. A country for which my mum’s colonial education had not equipped her” (HSDY 4). When her mother Vino came home “exhausted from hours of standing on her feet folding fresh linen in the bowels of the Grosvenor House Hotel,” (3) she was back in their cozy room curled up on their double-bed listening to music. She was a sensitive child, she was sympathetic to her mother and proud of her mother’s work, but she had big dreams, and had to abandon part of this dependence on her mother’s love to fulfil her own dreams. While Vino faces racism and suffers because she still clings to old customs of wearing a sari to work, and other habits, Mala readily adopts the social mores appropriate to her social context. Thus Mala learns from Vino’s mistakes. In her career as a journalist she rises early by her tactful handling of tricky situations, and definitely so because of the Asian kool image that she projected, like Tania in Life isn’t ..or Angie in Transmission. Her friends Caroline, a British Chinese girl, and Allie, an Irish girl from a broken home influence Mala in the ways they take risks to fulfil their ambition: Mala fully internalizes Western influences, and her individuation is complete at the end of the novel, Mala’s commitment to developing her career, her acquiring agency despite her mother’s control and authority, and her aggressive upward mobility are direct results of such influence. Mala seems to be a successor of Sumitra, though she maintains contact and emotional rapport with her mother, unlike Sumitra who disowns her family. Mala’s mother said about her, “You are headstrong and impulsive, but you have a good heart and a sense of purpose that will see you successfully through life” (244). Thus the two texts view women’s agency in different ways, possibly due to the difference in education levels of the two older women, Vino and Mrs.Patel. Authorial intervention colours this difference in the attitudes of the girls as well: the East-European author of Sumitra’s Story easily distances herself from the question of Sumitra’s relationship with her mother, but the BrAsian author does not.

Mother and daughter relationships and their linkages to the mother’s domestic
labour and outwork are examined in another text, *The Red Box*, by Farhana Sheikh of Pakistani origin. Though published in 1991, the novel is set partly in the late seventies and eighties, and the Muslim women in it, across class and social position, are still not able to sustain their efforts towards attaining an integrated identity. The discussion in above shows the peculiar plight of Muslim women who are caught in the double bind of domestic labour and outwork, seclusion from and yet participation in public life. In this novel, some of them contemplate return home, to Pakistan, as they are unable to compromise any longer, but ultimately stay on dealing with problems, supporting each other through failure and occasional success.

In this text there are two stories of women from different classes, which are linked irrevocably, without the knowledge of the characters concerned. Both Tahira’s and Nasreen’s mothers work in sweatshops owned by a wealthy Asian businessman named Khan, who exploits his poorer relatives. The social researcher Raisa’s own mother Sabah had been working, in a similar capacity, though she was from a higher class than these working class women.

The story of Sabah, is perhaps the most gruesome one, of the double life she led due her position as a dependant woman in a Pakistani Muslim family, brought to Britain by circumstance rather than choice. Her mother’s family needed financial assistance back in their village, there were legal problems over her own inheritance, and her husband was not as successful as he made it out to be. Despite their distinctly unAsian ways, their white and cosmopolitan friends and obviously upper class social affinities, Sabah needed to work secretly at first as Raisa recollects: “My father would joke that she had a secret job” (*RB* 192). Sabah called herself Sonya and went to work at a cushion maker’s in unhygienic conditions, all the time telling at home that she worked as a clerk. All that she allowed her family to know was that she worked outside: “She had been out all day, working. She worked full-time now. We still didn’t talk about the details of her work. She wasn’t trained for anything ‘professional’—her education didn’t count in this country – but we all knew that she worked full-time” (194).

Neither her husband nor her daughters wanted to share her guilty secret: the fact that she needed to go out to some kind of work was so demeaning to their social status that ignorance about its details was desirable. Her story was never known, her labour went unrecognized, as did her pain of being uprooted from Haila and forcibly acculturated in London after marriage to meet her husband’s Westernised social
position. It was her father’s social position that Raisa and her sister were anxious to protect, and so obliterated her mother’s outside work totally. Raisa finds out all this after her death from the accounts she kept in a red box, and from two of her colleagues, both immigrants, “Denise from Jamaica and Maria from the Phillipines” (220), from the sweatshop. They were astounded at Sonya’s affluent family background, and must have wondered why she needed to work and give up her life due to fatigue and clearly visible signs of illness? Raisa had to piece together this shocking narrative and feels that her father and her mother’s brothers as well as she herself were to blame for this wasteful death:

How had he let her suffer that strain and humiliation? He was a barrister; he was educated: he should have been earning enough. And how could her brothers have been so greedy? They were also to blame.

Under all this sat my own guilt. My anger would not sit one place: its target was the world (225).

Her mother’s tragic death and the strange circumstances of her life’s suffering makes all of Raisa’s own research into her community’s teenagers facing racism take on a new meaning. She finds out that she and her lower class subjects are not so alienated after all, united by the secrets of the red box. Her identity as the educated upper class researcher, in trying to define and study the formation of her subjects’ identities, gets conflated on theirs, and she realizes the impossibility of defining identities simplistically, by theory and ethnographic research.

Sheikh quotes the little wage-slips that recorded Sabah’s miserable work experience. From these Raisa learns how

“Jean-Pierre” was a factory. ....where one week they thought she was “Sony” and the next “Sunaya”. They had given her a half-hour for lunch, a ten-minute break at some other time in the day, and seven-pence for a cushion....I looked back at the pieces of paper. They were telling her that she was not working hard enough. The wage slip was also a reprimand and a testament to her inefficiency. There must have been a productivity drive. Her hours had been increased. She wasn’t well. Oh God, my mother couldn’t have been well. The date on the last slip of paper was December 10th. She had a week left. The people who didn’t know her name wanted her to work harder. If she had lived long enough, they would have sacked her. (224)

The red box becomes a symbol of secrecy, of unknown grief and shame of exploitation, containing evidence of a woman’s struggle against capitalist forces which negate her very existence, shatter her dreams of living freely in a supposedly free country. The author points out how she became a victim of an illegal system that
did not respect her social position nor give her time or the provision to learn suitable trades which she could practice with dignity.

In the Rashid household, there is a similar kind of helpful consideration for the mother. Even Hussain, Tahira’s older brother, cooks a tasty dinner, truly doing his bit to maintain the domestic routine. Perhaps this happens as there is no tyrannical father present in Tahira’s case, and there is a reasonable amount of freedom for the children who are quite assertive and independent, as opposed to the docile Ehsan girls. There is, however, an undercurrent of a threat to reject all that is British, in Nargis’ mind. For Nargis, Tahira’s mother, the end of all her dreams is to go back to Pakistan to stay with her mother, not to aspire to a British identity at all, against the wishes of her children, but to earn her freedom from her stay in the country.

Nargis Rashid, a widow, worked in the factory which took long hours away from her, and made her tired and older, all the while under a cloud because of her attempts at unionizing at her previous job, asking for “proper money and safety” at work (RB 146). Nargis saw very critically through the tone and body language of her employer, seeing how he was setting one employee against another, and how, by not registering their names as immigrants, these women had no access to any system of justice against Khan’s exploitation. Her long conversations with her colleague Zaibie, Anwar, and her boss Khan show how much she loathed being exploited in “K&K fashions” and how little choice she and others like her had (158-163).

Jackie West and Sophie Pilgrim (1995: 357-378) discuss in their article based on South Asian women in Bristol, the differential economic activity among South Asians in Britain, examining how that is influenced by familial and labour market conditions. They also explore ethnic difference and its impact on the working couple, the experience of women in the domestic labour due to migration, and the extensive economic and social disadvantage they face alongside diversity and racism. According to West and Pilgrim, Pakistani and Bangladeshi women participate in the labour market in ways like Nargis and Bulqis do, and they have to face more than just cultural and religious constraints on their public roles as workers. They have a low economic activity rate because of heavy domestic responsibilities and the peculiar local restriction on labour, which allows them to work in family owned clothing factories of kins, rather than other employment as school dinner-ladies, or in food factories etc. The research shows how, in the name of providing “protection”, the factory-owning relatives endlessly exploit them:

228
Although work in family enterprises and minority-owned firms accords with cultural gender codes (and contributes to high levels of exploitation), women’s presence there is a response to racial discrimination in the wider labour market and the female relatives of owners may themselves take active part in the control of workers. (1994: 359)

The trauma of the women can be recorded most authentically by a fictional insider, and most of these novels having autobiographical echoes, these details are the outpourings of some female relative, mother or aunt, discovered or overheard by the author at some time in her childhood as in “The Red Box”. Thus, these observations are authentic, though embodied in a fictional mode, and are very useful in recording the emotional and psychological trauma of the BrAsian migrant woman employed in the private sector, and in the case of The Red Box, the frustration of the academic researcher in her career growth. The state funded reports or university research valuably records the physical, economic and social aspects of the lives of such women and their families, but there is no other mode than fiction, through the mediation of the personality of the author, which can recreate the emotional trauma they undergo.

It is texts like these authenticate the emergence of the proactive South Asian British woman who is the mainstay of the successful economy, or, as in these cases, the pillar of strength in a family broken apart due to an absent or dead or unemployed male, the father, the official head of the family. They had to stay and make it good here, returning would never become a reality, so they performed to the best of their ability. As Fauzia Ahmad writes: “Migrant women then, far from confirming stereotypes of secluded and “passive Asian women” played key roles in their contribution towards household economies, the reconstruction of cultural traditions, labour movements and emerging political dialogues” (2003: 44).

**Piecework.**

Many of the BrAsian women who work in factories also bring work home, or do extra piecework along with their domestic duties at home, while there are other women who do piecework only at home. It is found that in such cases the children, and rarely the husband, help the BrAsian woman with her paid labour or the domestic work she has to perform. But often there is no such help, instead, the girl child takes such work for granted, or, despite her realisation of her mother’s hard life, decides to leave and move on in her own upward path. The BrAsian writers do not wish to
stereotype the portraiture of these working women as “victims” needing rescue, unlike sociologists like Bhopal, Ghuman, Anwar or Stopes-Roe: they take their probing further into how, within the household, their gendered geographies configure their agency or the lack of it.

One of the short stories in *Flaming Spirit* (1994) contain material suitable for analysis at some length. “Still Waters” by Janet McDermott deals with an incident in the life of a young British Muslim girl called Shazia Rashid, a lesbian jilted by the young white girl she loved. Whist Shazia’s mother works at home for years together, cutting cloth for tailoring, she goes to Oxford, having qualified by merit. Shazia recollects how, when she just heard from her lover Fliss who refused to meet her in London:

Mummy was cutting out material on the floor of the living-room, scissors slicing the slippery cloth with cool precision, so sure, so definite. All my life I have watched her cut cloth with neither measure nor pattern, her hands shaping it, understanding it, knowing it with the same sureness of instinct she applies to everything. I studied her dark, gleaming head bent over her work, her black hair threaded through with silver-grey, the knotted veins on her long brown hands. (*FS*13)

When she looked up and asked her what time her train was, Shazia, smitten by guilt, remorse and sorrow, “turned and ran out of the house into the bright, clamorous street” (ibid). The representation of women like Shazia’s mother bring to life not only their daily struggles with forces that utilise or suppress their labour, but also the way their identities are often taken for granted, or ignored by their daughters, who are in search for their own self-hood, despite the knowledge of the mother’s ability and self-assured manner. Shazia must, abandon childhood loyalties, leave home and her mother to her own devices, to find her own place under the British sun. Thus it is not only race, class and gender that configure the power geometry of the BrAsian working woman, there is a reiteration of indifference from the family as a unit, which exploits her labour as a matter of course. The role of the young daughters, in undermining their mother’s labour shows how desire for upward mobility and modernity characterises the family as a unit. The family becomes a site which renders the working mother’s labour invisible, and the home a place for reinscribing patriarchal norms and ethics of indifference, as some of the texts bear out.

In *The Red Box* both Tahira’s and Nasreen’s mothers work in Khan’s sweatshops. Khan employed these needy women from his own community: Bulquis
worked from home as she had her husband who preferred it that way, and the girls Rehana and Nasreen helped cut and sew blouses for which they got only 25 pence per piece. The same blouses sold for 25 pounds in the shops, of course, but the women did not complain, as they had no access to any other form of labour. Throughout the seventh chapter \textit{(RB 40-49)} of the text, when Raisa visits Bulquis Ehsan, the girls and their mother are distracted by the thought of Khan sending for the blouses, and Rehana’s anxiety to finish them, and not waste time socializing with Raisa is made painfully apparent to the reader. The girls are both anxious not to compromise on the money earned by outside work as the father is poorly paid and under a threat to lose his job as a bus conductor. In this text, unlike the others quoted earlier, there is, instead of irony and rebellion, profound sympathy and sharing of the anxiety of the overworked mother. Whatever be the fictional justification in Farhana Sheikh’s intent, there is evidence of a concerted effort in these families to aspire towards and secure an alternative lifestyle. Hard work is seen as the only road to a better future for the Ehsan children, not just for marriage but other aspects of their social identity as respectable Muslims, and as confident, worthwhile individuals. Needless to add, these families are multiple sites where patriarchal norms of the South Asian family tradition are exercised, and all the members are coopted into the project of exploitative poorly paid “domestic” labour.

Another text which deals with two single mothers, Razia and Nazneen is Monica Ali’s \textit{Brick Lane} (2001). Nazneen discovers her own potential after her husband Chanu leaves for Bangladesh and her lover Karim disappears. With her friend Razia, somewhat improbably, she becomes a successful designer of Indian clothes for the Westerner or Westernized BrAsians in leading suburban apparel stores. Herself widowed with two children, one a drug addict, Razia still stands by Nazneen when Chanu leaves. With Razia’s help, Nazneen who had no dreams other than of being free, becomes free to dance, sing, skate, dress and live as she pleases. She crosses the boundaries or the frontiers of western lifestyle: she always dresses like a man in front of the mirror, dancing, contorting her body in fantastic shape, and she feels finally free to do as she pleases. But, though she is told “This is England,...you can do whatever you like” (2001: 492), is that enough to guarantee freedom? She had been in London for so many years, and now, dressed in a sari, skating on the rink, is she really free? Does dress or dancing, skating or mimicking male movement signify “freedom” or is such freedom merely notional? Tabish Khair (2006), in an article
entitled “The Death of the Reader” in the journal Wasafiri, suggests that the reader is “not a blank receptor of intentions of the text but someone who actually reads” (1). Referring to the concluding part of Brick Lane, Khair suggests how slippages like these give a false illusion to readers about freedom, especially when there are rampant discriminatory practices on even routine checks for passport and visa documents for Asian academics who have names like his, that is, Muslim names. Is the reader then merely reading for enjoyment and enlightenment or is he or she an active thinker and interpreter? If the reader discerns for herself, she finds both Nazneen’s action and Razia’s statement very incongruous, giving a false expectation of freedom where it may only be notional. Khair argues again that there is “some indication that a chunk of contemporary fiction seeks to cast the reader in a rather passive and celebratory role - suave, polished, talented at times - that is celebrated in many well-meaning circles” (2). Khair’s suggestion that perhaps certain readers, especially those who subscribe to Western multiculturalism, might actually celebrate such writing as if it were enabling, explains why the novel had become so popular, and won accolades, though it was severely criticised by discerning BrAsians, and the Bangladeshi community itself. The novel assumes the construction of a “wilfully ahistorical reader” who “wants to feel good about being who or what she is, and a knowledge of history --- even one’s own history --- does not always cause one to feel good” (ibid). This is true of the falsified style of Monica Ali’s novel, which is not really a major part of this discussion, but needs to be framed in its relevant context.

Perhaps Razia and Nazneen’s attainment of limited cognitive and corporal agency relates to Monica Ali’s attitude to the “victim” of transnational marriage, Nazneen, who is without any moorings, speechless and directionless in the diaspora. It appears from the text that without the received wisdom from Razia, Karim and her husband, Nazneen would not have been able to make sense of her own life. Agency is conferred on this third world woman by three sources, she cannot earn it on her own: Chanu, her husband who brought her to London; Karim, her lover who takes her out to teach her the complications of political self-assertion; and the widow Razia, who herself struggles to find a dignified means to survive. Monica Ali seems to strain to confer agency on a muted character like Nazneen towards the end of the text, with Nazneen’s illusion of freedom through skating unfettered, and thus the text seems to be limited by her lack of commitment to her protagonist, Nazneen.
Managing Stores.

BrAsian women’s labour is also, often rendered invisible when they stand by their husbands in stores. The family-owned store or cornershop is a common feature in suburban Britain, and most of these are Asian owned. Many of the texts show how the erstwhile store-attendant gradually becomes the store-owner with the support of his family (Hj), or how the younger generation sees working in stores as only a stopgap arrangement (Mira in LFM, Chila in LI, the BrAsian women in CCC), unlike their parents’ generation which made a career out of them.

Hari-jan, (1992) Ravinder Randhawa’s novel for young readers, contains glimpses of upper class Punjabi women of both the younger and the older generation who are quite serious about their career, or business, and take an active part in it, socialize and aspire to material success. This skill and desire to survive and succeed is like a genetic hallmark of most of the British Punjabi women portrayed in the novels, an asset to their community, which is only recently being recorded by sociologists (Bhachu 1991; Jhutti 1998). Their persistence, their focused and goal-oriented approach is belied by their conviviality, their easygoing, effortless social behaviour. In the novel, the portraits of the older women, Harjinder’s mother and Suresh’s mother, are very strong, well-defined, and independent. They share their husband’s social status with their own contribution, they are upper class but not snobbish, they have no false airs, and are quite sure of their own dignity and status as earning members, at the same time allowing their children to learn the same respect for work of any kind. Though Ghazala’s mother and Binny’s mother do not share the same social status as the others, they too share the same dignity of labour and self-pride, as is evident from Harjinder’s discussion with Ghazala about her father’s unsuccessful career (57-58), and her chat with her Masiji, about her work at the factory making heavy cardboard boxes (32-34). Ghazala refused help from Harjinder’s family, “Because they are successful,... and I couldn’t go to them and shop on Papa, and say he’s a failure” (59). From her aunt Hari-jan learns how she refuses promotion because she feels that her employer might be expecting more than gratitude when “He smiled, he took my hand,...He does not need to touch me” when he told her about how capable she was for getting promoted.

Parminder Bhachu analyses Punjabi women’s enterprise in many articles and books, ever since 1985, and her work shows the tremendous impact their domestic labour and outwork have on the success of their community as survivors. The
enterprising Punjabi community is a role model for South Asian women, and Punjabi women have always enjoyed a status of honour and respect in the Asian communities. However, the rise of dowry and deaths of young brides related to demand for dowry has undermined the agency of Punjabi women in the subcontinent to some extent. Mankekar studies the linkages between television serials, advertisements of consumer durables and the increasing demands for dowry in lower middle class Delhi society in an ethnographic study (Mankekar 1999). There are references to some violent incidents in Meera Syal’s novel (LI) set in the Punjabi community in London, but not related to dowry, though detailed studies of these may be found elsewhere. Despite this harsh fallout of increasing materialism, the novels here reinforce the notion, without building stereotypes, of the courage, determination and community support that Punjabi immigrant women of the first and second generation enjoy in Britain. Sociological documents like Bhachu (1991), Jhutti (1998), Ahmad (2006) show how the identity of BrAsian women is largely being constructed by their seizing financial agency within the dowry system. This and other texts (LI, AWOW) may show how the investment of Punjabi women of the younger and older generation in political activity related to providing services and shelter to disadvantaged BrAsian women shapes new identities of BrAsian women as independent agents of change.

Atima Srivastava’s second novel, Looking for Maya (1999), has the second-generation Londoner Mira as the protagonist. In her anxiety over independence, when her parents were at Delhi, Mira took up a job as shop assistant at a garment store during the January sales, to be able to earn her pocket-money. Like the other youngsters, she laughed at the terribly old-fashioned way the store functioned. She was a Londoner like any of them, and knew enough about old-fashioned ways and how to live with them. She confesses, “For us it was a stop gap, a way of earning a bit of cash and we sniggered at the older members of staff who took such care and pride over how to fold a garment or arrange the gloves in their boxes” (LFM 117). For Mira this job was only a means to an end. She adds, “The work was part-time and suited me very well. I didn’t want to think I’d completely sold out and started working for a living. Frank gave me his old ansaphone as a present to commiserate with my first week in the world of work” (ibid). However, it is at this old-fashioned venue that she found Mrs. Menozzi, a kind old lady whom she later befriended, and Connor, her new love-interest, a young Irishman who loved to hang out in London like her, and who could make her laugh.
Chila (LI) works at the local Leo Supermarket before marriage as only a shop assistant, because she is bored with a lonely life, loves to meet people and be surrounded with beautiful things, but she is the “luckiest”, with a rich, handsome husband, a first-born son and her mother by her side. Her only career is home-making, after Deepak insists on her putting an end to her career at the stores, and she puts a hundred per cent of her energy into cooking, cleaning, coordinating furnishings and little details in her house to perfection. The fact that she has to give up her married life for peace of mind is a confirmation of her strength, drawn from her community, her mother and her friends, as much as her inner being. Chila’s growth into a self-reliant woman is part of the narrative of the position of BrAsian women written by Bhachu (1991), Jhutti (1998), Puwar and Raghuram (2003), Ahmad (2003; 2006), Takhar (2003), Ramji (2003) and others, who locate agency and not victimhood in their lives.

Nalini (OHSW) and her children apparently share a relationship founded on mutual respect and abiding love, however, circumstances pose challenges to this bond. Maya and Satchin are very kindly disposed to their mother: they share the housework and keep to their hearts their sorry fate at school from their mother, who has been abandoned by their feckless father. They do not hurt her even when they do not like her clinging on to Indian habits despite work and a busy schedule. Nalini’s use of food, especially spices and chutneys, and the way they are served, become emblems of the societal macrocosm she carries to the host country: she has no intention of letting the children forget who they are, and how best but through food can they remember? Even when she makes omelettes, she adds masala or coriander, she tries to put in Indian touches to Western food. Alicia Otano (2002), in an interesting article on a Chinese American novel China Boy by Gus Lee, speaks eloquently about the overemphasis on food and eating in the novel:

All these scenes related to food and eating with the family demonstrate how the narrator privileges these rituals as a vital part of the negotiations of identity and self-affirmation. Alimentary detail supports and validates the epistemological process; it is a supplement to cultural meaning. Moral values and meals are complexly interwoven: the giving, receiving, eating and serving of food become means of signifying (2002: 218).

In Nair’s novel, there are many reversals, and recombinations, like the spices used in omelettes, which determine the future of Nalini and her children. The mother plays the role of the absent father as breadwinner, white friends turn out to be more
trustworthy and selfless than the Indian husband, the Indian food which the children detest turns out to be popular and a source of income for the family, love in youth and privileged circumstances (Raul and Nalini) gains over love found in fading youth and poverty (Ravi and Nalini, Maggie and Jack). This text then, creates a base for the bond of filial love in a single parent family, wound upon the ingenuity and enterprise of a single woman. The opposing value systems of rural Kerala versus metropolitan London are played out by counterpointing anxiety, betrayal and poverty against confidence, trust and material well-being.

The Cambridge Curry Club (2004) is Saumya Balsari’s answer to the charge that the diaspora is passé and out of fashion. She turns many well-known clichés upside down, with humour and irony in her novel about a day in the life of “IndiaNeed”, a charity shop in Cambridge for the aid of Rajasthani villagers, and its four female staff. Heera, the Sindhi manager, Swarna, the elderly Bengali lady, Durga, the young Maharashtrian woman, share this space every Thursday with Eileen, the elderly retired Irish Mathematics teacher, who would not change her duty as she likes being with this talkative lot. This group of women work here only on Thursdays, part-time, for pleasure rather than need or social commitment, and most of the time they are busy talking to each other or gossiping about the snobbish owner, Lady Di, Diana Wellington-Smythe, who does not even try to remember their names. The novel describes the adventures of one of their Thursdays, but alongside, there are vignettes of each of them at home, their spouses and the people they come into contact with that day, all except Eileen, whom the writer remembers as a character almost at the end.

Heera is the one most comfortable in her immigrant status, but the most vociferous one against arranged marriage. Her marriage with the Englishman Bob is nearly over, but she is too tough to fall apart, and maintains a friendly relationship with Bob. Her love of freedom as an independent agent perhaps stems from her immigrant status. Though she socialises with her own community, her marriage to Bob gives her an already liberated status that many are envious of. As store manager, she works full time, and she has a wide social circle, which helps her to draw distinctions between “Asians born here, coming from East Africa, and coming from India out of choice and free will”. She mentions how she still automatically converts pounds into Rupees, keeps a rupee coin in her purse, misses the jostling crowds and old faces, all because she, like Swarna followed her husband to England (191). Swarnakumari’s anxieties are also related to the socio-cultural behaviour of girls like her daughter. She
tries to share her worries with Durga, and laments at the behaviour of the second-
generation girls. Though she complains a lot about the English, their habits and their
food, she is quite contented in Britain, especially since mushrooming Asian shops sell
the essential commodities that help retrench her old Calcutta lifestyle. All her anxiety
is over the marital prospects of her obese, plain daughter, Mallika, a brilliant student.
Durga is the young face of this three generational group. She is married, but the others
apparently do not know that, and she is openly critical about most traditional Indian
practices, and contemporary ideas on diaspora. Caught in a stifling arranged marriage
herself, she is trying to make her own place as a television researcher in London, soon,
working here is only a stop-gap for her. Tossed between the two countries twice, she is
the product of a transnational culture: her culture is of survival in an impermanent
world. Eileen is a witty but quiet person. The oldest in the group, she loves
mathematics and lives quietly with her plumber husband. She is perhaps reticent in
comparison to the others, but the one who is most orderly, organized, yet ever ready
for an adventure, most dependable to help out, clean or look out for her colleagues in a
crisis.

Talking about immigration and the diaspora is the favourite pastime of these
women: they take a variety of position on their own immigrant status, comparing,
contrasting and projecting their thoughts to the future. Invariably, when they talk about
their immigrant status, the talk hovers around marriage, food and Bollywood films.
The bizarre end of the novel finds all the women jobless, but in new phases of their
lives, for better or for worse. One thing is true for all the four women, “IndiaNeed”
had brought them together to a better understanding of their own needs and
aspirations, about their love and longing, their commitment to themselves and those
they cared for, it was not merely an exotic setting but a third space, what Bhabha finds
imperative to transmute a liminal existence into a meaningful one. These women
characters again remind one of their more popular Asian American counterparts who
head westwards into the wild western America from the safer community inhabited
areas, as the new pioneers of the new age diaspora (Faymonville 2002). On a larger
scale, the ending of the novel, the breakdown of “Indianeeeds” the charity shop, with
the formation of the “Cambridge Curry Club” an authentic, as opposed to the many
spurious, Indian restaurant, seems to prefigure the hypothetical death of the nation-
state Appadurai (1997), and the rebuilding of a transnational space through tighter
control of culture and capital, as foretold by others (Hannerz 2002; Portes 2001;
One of the most exceptional part-time entrepreneurs in these texts is not a BrAsian but a white British woman married to one. Shirley (AWOW), who is disowned by her parents from the majority community after marrying Kuli’s son Arvind, helps her husband run a motor garage and repairing shop. By lending strong, practical support to her husband Arvind, she makes him regain self-respect and make a career out of almost nothing. Shirley insisted that the children learn the language, culture and customs, and tried to instill pride in them, rather than be troubled by self-doubt or identity problems, for “They’ve got to be proud of what they are”, and not “ashamed of anything” (94). Shirley also made them “practise Hindi at home” because “It’ll be good for business. Knowing the lingo” (94). They were both living antagonisms: “A real working-class Black-Englishman hero, with his white wife at his side” (92). Her daughter-in-law rekindles Kuli’s self-doubt and wavering loyalty towards an almost disinherited Indianness. Kuli leaves Arvind’s house, visibly shocked at Shirley’s strong sense of identification with and insistence on following Indian customs.

Thus it is not only possible to have transnational loyalties in adopted communities, but the odd inter-racial marriage may result in the blurring of the borders of nationhood and belonging. Perhaps the author wants to suggest that often, it is women who are, regardless of racial origin, more conscious of preserving culture and rootedness in a balanced, non-heretical manner than most men. Shirley is no different from the many British Punjabi or Muslim women we find in the texts surveyed, who respect the originary impulse without fanaticism, gently but firmly imposing customs and values on their children or husbands whenever appropriate. She stands as a reminder that multiculturalism implies learning from each other, not merely assimilating by surrendering one’s culture to mainstream influences, nor integrating with a bias towards the “higher” mainstream culture (Alibhai-Brown 2001; Watson 2002). Kuli emerges stronger after interacting with women like her, so, instead of hiding behind a masked exterior, she uses it as a costume in a film made on Asian women’s mental problems, confronting reality rather than escaping from it.

**Clerical Work.**

The BrAsian novelists, usually but not always second-generation migrants themselves, reveal, through their representation of similar women, a wide range of career options facing them at the end of their scholastic career. Among the second-generation women who are educated beyond school in the novels, there are those who
train for work in specific areas, or take up clerical work. Besides these, there are the lonely South Asian wives of sojourners or white British men who work when it is necessary.

The story “Pedal Push” in Right of Way (1988) describes a young BrAsian girl who works in a lawyer’s firm, but is irked to find that she seems to provide some diversion to her white boss who is bored with his wife. “Colin liked a bit of exotica in his office”, and “his eyes ran their daily course over her body” (RW 7). Her bad day at office would be signalled by a puncture in her cycle tyre, and her boss Colin’s series of mournful stories about his differences with his wife. The unnamed narrator is bored at work, and wishes “she could change circumstances and move on”, as she finds “all the cases merge into a blur of broken homes, broken limbs and a sordid saga of ‘not me, it was him/her/they who dunnit’, till she felt like she was working in life’s casualty ward” (9). But when her handsome boyfriend Pradeep insists on her accompanying him, to America, on his terms, she finds it difficult to agree and lets Pradeep go. She leaves her job and takes a law course, and despite the pain of giving up Pradeep, realizes the importance of doing something entirely for herself. In fact she even inspires her boss’s much maligned wife to take up her position in the office, much to his chagrin, thus truly avenging herself in finding liberation. She also befriends a black man in the lawyer’s firm, who was jailed for six months, and convinces her parents to be more open towards black people.

Though Sumitra (SS) leaves home, thus answering to the stereotypes in mainstream records about maladjusted BrAsian girls (Bhopal 1997; Ghuman 1999), this short story, written in the late eighties, is one of the few to register the needs of the young Asian woman to be independent of parents or men, not leaving home but making crucial choices remaining there, to influence her parents towards developing socially inclusive attitudes to black people, and also to her own assertion of selfhood by not following her boyfriend to America.

Martina Ghosh-Schellhorn (1999) writes:

It is when the protagonist encounters someone even more exotic than herself in the form of a young black criminal that she begins to reconsider the various stereotypes within those securities each community in “multicultural” Britain is safely ensconced. The consequences of her unconventional behaviour are that her highly-eligible Indian boyfriend settles for a future without her and she is free albeit emotionally wounded, to embark on yet another unconventional course of action by studying law. (40)

239
Sumitra (SS) works at a travel agents' desk, aiming one day to become an air-hostess, wishes to negate all her past as if that would give her freedom. She decides to leave school to take up a job, though with a sense of guilt, as she would have liked to study further (129). She finds herself depressed and yet decides against studying as she would ultimately have to help at Jayant’s shop if she stayed at home, as her mother refused to let her try to be an air-hostess (123). Her job search leads her from a part-time, low paid job at Hanbury’s to a ribbon maker’s, then a detective agency, till she finds employment at a travel agents, for reasonably good money. Experience at work however, changes her cynicism and self-doubt. She finds a lot of help and support at work, especially from the elderly Pat, who treats her like an equal, and from Roger and Mike at Hanbury’s. She is not only not discriminated against, but spoken of as “a lovely Pakistani girl”, she smokes and drinks with her friends and colleagues, and achieves the distancing from her background necessary for changing into someone more British than Asian when she decides to leave home. She thinks about how “all her Indian friends discussed leaving home... It was a myth, a legend to cling to, an empty dream that would never come true, but which was comforting and consoling” (142), especially to girls like Sulima and herself.

As discussed in the previous chapter, it is her education that enables Sumitra to strive for freedom, and though she leaves school, her O-levels in Russian, her good spelling and typing skills do stand her in good stead. Sumitra comments on the employment scenario:

Some of her friends were still unemployed and she knew that often she would not even have been granted an interview because of her name. Some employers, despite the Commission for Racial Equality, would not consider taking on a Patel, an Asian, a foreigner. That was part of the problem – while she wanted to leave the encircling culture of her parents, there were other forces eager to push her back inside it (152).

Sumitra felt she would be blown “like an autumn leaf driven by the wind with no power or will of its own”, and so “Getting a steady job was the first step in putting a foot outside the circle” (ibid).

Thus the importance of career over education is clearly shown in the text: for a BrAsian girl of those times, it was important to secure financial independence to assert selfhood both in and out of the house. But, as discussed in the previous chapter, in section 3.4, Sumitra’s leaving home, daring and liberating as may be, seems to be for selfish reasons, denying all the support her parents and the community gave her in the early years after migration, only to seek a notional freedom internalised from the
Western society she was so influenced by. She uses the education and supports her parents’ labour and selfless care gave her, to break free of the very space, which nurtured her aspirations, her home. As discussed earlier, Rukshana Smith’s personal role as mediator in her Asian friend’s life probably guided her in such a portrayal, whereas the texts written by BrAsian authors, while depicting girls like Sumitra, are careful to show the dangers of such negative attitudes to the home, or the willingness of BrAsian girls to stay within the system, rebel and try to change it.

Sometimes the South Asian wives who accompany their husbands to Britain are not able to find jobs befitting their education, as found elsewhere in this chapter. Sunetra Gupta’s heroines are generally lonely individuals from the upper middle-class conservative Bengali households from Calcutta, brought up on Rabindra Sangeet, Romantic English poetry and a restlessness or wanderlust that is quintessentially Bengali as Meenakshi Mukherjee suggests in her introduction to Amitav Ghosh’s The Shadow Lines (Mukherjee 1995: 255-267). Her characters, specially the female protagonists, are invariably loners, intellectually sharp, free individuals pursuing unusual careers who are yet caught in conflicting value systems, between Western individualism and eastern conformity, but they refuse to be typecast, they are unpredictable and even mysterious. They are usually in love with strange outsiders, from abroad or outside their social class or milieu, are drawn by their charm and yet abruptly abandon them, or disappear into a totally different setting. Memories of Rain (1992), finds a young upper middle class educated Bengali girl, Monideepa, married to an Englishman, coming to terms with her colonial obsession with Englishness. She feels totally out of place in England, among her husband Antony’s intellectual friends who are so different from her brother’s set of friends back in Calcutta. To fill her spare time, and to add to the family’s income, Moni at first takes up the job of an issuing clerk at the Public Library. Her husband, who has already started deceiving her with another woman, feels pained at her long hours of work.

He is immersed in a satisfying gratitude, she has seen him through it all, she has come back after long hours at the Public Library, smelling of dead ink, her fingers bruised with books, her calves sore from standing for hours, mindlessly issuing books, while he has fretted and banged upon his typewriter, she has cleared away the debris of his frustrations without a murmur, cooked him dinner, she has borne him his child, his angel, she has spent many lonely evenings while he has drowned the forgotten poetry of his soul in the ivory billows of another woman’s flesh……etc.(MR 141)

She later took up a job of interpreting, translating the complaints of
Bangladeshi patients to doctors “that drove her to the pits of squalor they called their homes” (170) again a far cry from the great city of her dreams, of her vast reading of the great English novelists. She had studied English literature, and she had thus been rendered completely unemployable in her present circumstance (see 4.3). Had she been in Calcutta, she would perhaps have become a teacher, like the ones she had in college, teaching some more upper class girls Wordsworth and the Brontes. At the end of the novel, when she leaves the country, she looks forward to a yet more secluded life, working perhaps in a village school, staying away from prying eyes of relatives, in silence, or helping the Jesuit priest in his work. Lost and forsaken, Moni still recovers her selfhood from the ruins and decides to make sense of her life again, thus her brief sojourn gives her some kind of agency, though she decides to leave.

The 1998 text *Anita and Me* shows Daljit, Meena’s mother, as a confident, suave British Punjabi woman, very upwardly mobile and yet rooted in her own culture. Though she dons western clothes to work at a local school, she retains an air of sophistication and elegance her neighbours cannot help noticing and being envious of. There is an inherent racism in her attitude to the “gorai” replicated by her friends and “relatives” in private. She would always like to assert her racial superiority over the white women in the neighbourhood who do menial work, speak wrong and accented English in contrast to her clear enunciation. It is all presented with a tongue in cheek humour by the author who sees this poignant contrast between aspiration and attainment through the eyes of the precocious Meena, who is herself quite in tune with her mother’s thinking, but speaks in a perfect Brummy accent when with them. The novel alternates between a comic suspicion of the upwardly mobile young Asian couple, the Kumars, and sympathy for their difficult beginnings.

The precocious narrator Meena reminds the reader of the early days in England, the still earlier Delhi and Punjab village days full of hardship and yet a rustic happiness. This clearly establishes the fact that the family is really desirous of fulfilling deep-seated material needs as much as anybody in the West. In fact Meena’s father reminds her often that they had come to England for better opportunity. Even her mother tells Meena that they had come here only for better education, better facilities, to have a life free of bribery and corruption, for her and her brother (212), and she does not forget to add that things would have been different “if the British had not left us in such a damn big mess” (213). It is Meena’s mother’s education, language, her teaching job and refined behaviour, which finds acceptance in
Tollington society. But most of the first generation Asian women who have to do outwork are very uncomfortable, both to have to leave the house and to not be able to acculturate due to the language barrier and heavy domestic routine, as some of the other texts show. Though the family leaves Tollington for better prospects, it is not only for growing racism in the village, but because of profitable financial dealings with the fellow Asian in the Big House, an object of mystery and fear to Meena and her friends, but actually a shrewd, wealthy, Punjabi businessman who is approached by the Kumars at Daljit’s insistence. Survival in Thatcher’s England is not an end itself, for Daljit, it is only a means to success, for which a price must be paid, in this case giving up the end house next to the fields and open sky in Tollington, which reminded her of India. A question comes to mind: is their movement out of Tollington a distinct phase of their life, the place which they had treasured in their early days for the sake of nostalgia, or is it an indication of the need to obliterate the memory of India? One may also ask whether the memory of one’s native land is actually much deeper than mere superficial similarity? Perhaps both, for a woman of Daljit’s age and time, there is a need to forget and remember, deculturate and acculturate, in order to survive and succeed in the adopted homeland.

Academics, professionals, creative persons, social workers.

Among the highest categories of professions are the BrAsian doctors, lawyers, academic researchers, media-persons and researchers in film and television, advertising and journalism. Besides these there are writers, artists, designers and social workers. Though fulfilment through career or profession is the goal of every educated urban woman globally, the BrAsian woman shows how, their values, their community or family identity, and most importantly their self-image as BrAsians, is as important to them as advancement in career or promotion in jobs. Their qualifications, success rate or talent, their creative inputs are sometimes not realised early by their employers, and when they do so, it may be time for the BrAsian woman to find her own space by dint of her creativity, rather than be slotted in certain stereotyped job-patterns, as the texts seem to suggest.

One of the early texts AWOW has some BrAsian women in high places, like Pavan, the doctor, but there are more who are activists, or professionals who are also social workers, like Big Sister, Maya the researcher, Asha who also works at the Asian centre. There are also students like Shazia who is also an amateur journalist, drifters like Rani and Kulwant, dependent women like Kurshid or Ammi, working alongside
white British women like Caroline and Mark, and Afro-Caribbean women engaged in social work. In short, Randhawa portrays a range of women across race, class, age and religion with differential aspirations and opportunities, all centred on a common goal: helping disadvantaged women to reclaim their self-hood.

The unnamed narrator of *The Glassblower’s Breath* (1994), a title from one of Jelaluddin Rumi’s poems translated into English is much more assimilated into western culture: she had spent her childhood in Britain with her father for some time, and she is yet tortured between her two worlds. She is a successful research scientist with published papers to her name, a good job, and a lavish home with her English husband. She has a successful career as a researcher in biology, and is well known as a scholar, has travelled all over the world and made many friends. However, the novelist stresses the career path of her husband from time to time, and except for the cruel reference to the moths and butterflies she impales to study, there is not much discussion on her work as such. She is herself caught like a beautiful specimen in the house full of mirrors, in which all her lovers appear and are all killed in the span of a few hours one day, like the nursery rhyme “Rub a dub dub” about the butcher, the baker, the candlestickmaker.

Esha, the young wife of the alchemist Promothesh in *Moonlight into Marzipan* (1995) has her own job as lecturer in mathematics, and she is definitely a better student than her husband, but she gives up her career to follow him out of India to further his bizarre alchemical thesis. Turning gold into grass, Promothesh was possibly looking for the reverse result to emerge as well, like the fable of the miller’s daughter and Rumpelstiltskin. Unable to withstand the loneliness and betrayal of her husband with his Russian origin biographer Alexandra, she commits suicide. In short, Sunetra Gupta’s heroines are clever, intellectual, beautiful but corrupted by greed, desire and lust for fame. Bitten by the *wanderlust* of the great Bengali middle class (Mukherjee 1995), they cannot quite fathom the depths of the human mind, and often run away, abandon their family, or commit suicide. Bored with one place, they quickly move to another: they move from transcultural, transnational urban “switching points” as Appadurai (1994) calls them. Their stories are very similar to the tales of the Asian women in the American diaspora, those restless transnational entities, like Feroza or Jasmine, “The Holder[s] of the World” (Bharati Mukherjee 1993), whose responses to the migration process are being constantly tested against “the validity of their original cultural assets and the survival of philosophical, political, and linguistic attributes after
emigration” (Faymonville 248). They never really belong to the BrAsian diaspora, they are better understood as world-citizens carrying a transnational identity, wherever they make their home.

Niharika Roy, in Sunetra Gupta’s *A Sin of Colour* (1999) is a typical upper class Indian immigrant student, a researcher at Oxford. She was working on a captive pygmy in the Bronx Zoo, who was kept in the same cage as an orang utan, later released from the zoo, and took his own life. In that way Niharika was quite successful in advancing her career. Though apparently aloof and distant, a thoughtful introvert, she did not hesitate to use her lover’s gay friend, Morgan’s financial power or his contact in the publishing firm to get her book published even before her thesis was. Her relative newness to Oxford or the U.S. was not a deterrent to her ambition as a scholar. She was able to lead a comfortable social life, enjoying the scholarly ambience and the affection of her aunt, her uncle Debendranath’s English wife Jennifer, and the attentions of her married white British lover. Niharika’s disappearance with her lover, coincidentally occurs after her thesis is written, and before she thinks of returning permanently to India. Her disappearance from Oxford, the seat of systematised western learning, signals a symbolic withdrawal from it, and a retreat into the chaotic world of the unknown, the primitive, something like her subject, the anonymous pigmy in the Bronx zoo. Gupta seems again, as in *Glassblower’s Breath* and *Moonlight into Marzipan*, to be playing with the idea of the instability of western inquiry despite its frail but overt insistence on quantification, “telling” and analysis (refer to Nasta’s discussion on *Glassblower’s Breath* in the Conclusion).

A few other BrAsian women in the texts, like Durga (*CCC*) and Raisa (*RB*) also do academic research, related to Sociology. Durga seems to sometimes speak her lines as if with reference to contemporary theory, and one immediately links this to her subject of study: she is a student of political thought, M Phil in Modern Society and Global Transformation. Raisa was researching on Muslim girls scholastic aspirations in inner-city areas for her MA dissertation. Raisa knows the limitations of her research: she says sarcastically that she was going to put all that the Ehsan family told her in her thesis “and solve life’s injustices!” (*RB* 46). Raisa’s career repeats an oft-told story: she is not selected for the job she wanted, “They gave it to someone else. He was more experienced -- they had said -- and interviewed brilliantly” (227). She had to give way to a male candidate, perhaps for discriminatory factors not specified in
the text. Puwar and Raghuram (2003: 2) write about racial discrimination and the preference shown towards academicians from American universities, but this text emphasizes on gender discrimination, though race is not mentioned as one of the discriminating factors. Thus Raisa, her mother, Tahira, Nasreen, Bulquis and Nargis are all subjected to the differential socioeconomic pressures that determine the extent to which they can seek agency in their gendered, racialised and classed geographical spaces.

Sunita (Li), who comes from a more liberated background, had better options, she chose to marry Akash, a fellow student, and she herself worked in a law firm. She had failed in her law exam, stopped studying and started working as a lawyer’s assistance dealing with divorce and custody cases. She now finds that obesity, stagnation in an unfulfilling career and a sterile marriage is her bane. She is particularly disturbed as an Asian homemaker, she is the metropolitan face of womanhood in the nineties, of women mortified by the anxiety to perform well at home, at work, and in their sexual lives. After her brief Platonic interlude with Krishan, and after her friend Chila’s violent experience with her husband, and a brief contact with her loving parents, Sunita’s personal life and career both change. The novel leaves us with a glimpse of a changed Sunita, who decides to take up her law exams, begin again with Akash, looking forward to holidaying in Barcelona after her exams. The character of Sunita is an acknowledgement of the feeling of loneliness, gross inadequacy and low self-worth among so called successful women in happy homes, and the need to recognize their sometimes-early mid-life crisis and depression. It would do well to remember that this is an urban disease, not a typically BrAsian one, but a transnational and transcultural malaise studied by psychologists internationally (Ramu 1989: 13-15). The portrayal of such a crisis by Syal confirms her typically second generation concern for individual success and its linkage to social life and emotional balance of a young BrAsian woman in the 1990s. The way the crisis is resolves speaks for the centrality of friendship and self-help in the BrAsian diaspora community, as well as the agency of the second generation woman who is able to finally, take control of the public and private spheres of her existence, despite temporary lapses into unssuccess.

Written about somewhat similar people in a partially London setting, Coral strands (2001) by Ravinder Randhawa turns the immigrant novel genre on its head. It links colonial past with present, India and England, people from three generations,
men and women into a curious blend of fact and fiction, romance and mystery. Sita / Ferret, Emily, and Champa made an unusual combination of three women, united by the colonial encounter, who had only one another to turn to, due to complicated personal and historical events back in India. Sita quickly learns survival strategies, once in England, and starts living on her own, fending for herself as soon as she grows bold enough. Sita becomes an art dealer’s assistant, and then an art dealer herself. In on of the scenes in the novel, the writer gives a vivid picture of the kind of people she meets at work, at an exhibition in fact. There are Sita’s business associates, some art dealers from India, upstart, newly rich, who wish to flaunt their wealth, like Mr.Kalyan, her employer, and those who are more dignified and upper class like Mrs.Kalyan or Steven Singh. Randhawa describes:

They came in batches: the before-dinner group who looked, chatted and left, the after-work professionals, holding onto their briefcases, a few actually bringing out their chequebooks; thearty crowd, whom Sita/ Ferret recognized by the fact that they all wore black, only talked to each other and constantly spouted the word “project”; plus a small sprinkling of students who were torn between wanting to be radical and dismissive, and paying reverence to “roots ‘n’ kulcha”. The after-dinner group came late in the evening …etc (CS 23)

Sita had a really humble background: when she was a child, she was a servant at a prostitutes den. After she lives in London with her ex-employer Champa, she acquires agency to be able to wreak vengeance on people that had wronged her. From a poor exploited Indian girl in Britain, Sita becomes a smart, confident executive; agent of several reunions and an heiress free at last, to be whatever she wishes to. Whether it is white British men, women or BrAsians, Sita is able to fend for herself, making wise allies and giving support where needed. Like the hidden jewels that finally belong to her, Sita sparkles for those who can see it: her life as a BrAsian, situated in the diaspora community, gives her the wherewithal for a new existence.

Some of the texts portray women from the upper, intellectual class with aspirations commensurate with their positions, but they often make frequent forays into the lower classes because of associations with friends, and the need for quick access to independent earning, like Hari-jan, Angie, Mira or Durga. Mira (LFM) is a student, part-time store-assistant who is trying to become a writer but she is in a dilemma about her past, which she wishes to run away from, and yet finds security in. Hari-jan works at her parents’ store, like her mother and sisters, Angie (T) is a media researcher, betrayed by her white colleagues, who has no hesitation in going back to
waitressing at a pub. Durga (CCC) trains to be a media researcher, is very articulate and sound politically, and yet is in great discomfort within an arranged marriage, and thus works part-time at a charity shop. Durga's workmates, the upper-class women Heera, Swarna and Eileen, at Indianeed, are contented with their part-time careers, but not with their boss: they like their work, meeting new people, making friends, but their response to the snobbish indifference of their socialite boss is unanimously cold and unforgiving.

Harjinder works with her mother at the supermarket they run, but that does not stop her from studying for her A-levels, trying her hand at journalism, cooking, helping and giving company to her widowed aunt. She confesses that studying gives her immunity from marriage, but throughout the text she is busy falling in love and watching other people planning their marriages. She says that though she hated it she decided to stay on at school "slogging her guts out at 'A' levels", because her mother "couldn't very well say 'No!' to education and advancement" (15). Her career as a student is marked with her development as politically astute agent, she is able to organise events which require competence, and though she seems to stumble along at times, her community of friends across races and religious communities, gives her the insight into multicultural life on campus and outside. Her amateur foray into journalism rewards her suitably in the novel, when the event she covers is a success, and she also secures the attention of the mixed-race boy she grows to love. Thus Harijan is on her way to “become” BrAsian in more senses than one.

Angle (T) enjoys her waitress' job (41), and yet leaves when she finds work as a television channel's researcher in Soho. She tries hard to match up to the suave American Madeline and the experienced Derek at the new job, and she gradually finds out how little they care about the shows they make, or that they do not even have the time to watch what they produce. Angie is well accepted initially, for she brings in contacts and links quickly, but her straightforward approach would not suit the demands of the television channel, ever hungry for new content out of people's private lives, to make saleable reality shows. Angie is prized for her difference, her looks, her daring image, despite her Asianness, her wide circle of friends and acquaintances in London's club and pub scene, and her initial willingness to be coopted into the ruthless world of televisual reality shows.

The turning point in Angie's life comes when her friend Phillippa dies in a sudden road accident. Though the text does not play this up, there are so many changes
in Angie since then: she becomes more articulate in her love for Lol, her respect for Kathi, her subject, the protagonist of the reality show on AIDS grows, and she is able, unlike Tania (LI), to give priority to friendship, loyalty and respect for an individual’s privacy than protect her own career interest. After being cornered out of the film, when the director violates the privacy of the subject by showing her face on screen in the telefilm, against earlier promises of anonymity, Angie decides to take action to check this inhuman voyeurism. She responds to what Srivastava says to Mala Pandurang about Thatcherism:

I want to address the kind of value-system promoted by Thatcherism in the 1980s. Thatcherism was all about greed being good, promoting ruthless ambition, and encouraging people to ‘go for it’. Women were good at this. But if you came from a different value system as I believe I did, there was always the conflict. It is the conflict which makes Angle come clean. (Pandurang 2001a: 4)

Angie participates in a drunken, careless sexual encounter with Charles, her male colleague, but feels even more dismal afterwards, as it left her feeling exploited rather than fulfilled. It seemed to her that Charles was only looking at her as a commodified Asian body, ripe and ready for sex; sex with Charles was as if Angie’s reward for her compliance in the betrayal of Kathy. Angie’s realisation of her double exploitation by her seniors at the production house prompts her to throw the only good copy of the film on Kathy into the garbage van. Knowing that she will never get a job in the industry any more, she posts the only VHS copy to Kathi, the subject, signing “This belongs to you” (260). She says to herself on the noisy late-night bus home: “And amid the hubbub I felt uplifted, exhilarated. I was young, gifted and... brown! Hell, I could always go back to waitressing” (261), thus confirming her awareness of the racialisation of her identity in the British labour market, and yet confident of her diasporic subjectivity.

Where does Angie get this strength? Apparently, she is indifferent to family life, she mocks at her parents, her friends do not share so much of her work-life, then who, or what inspires her to change? Is it the racist attack in the train (254; also see 2.4), the racist abuses hurled at her mother over the phone by a stranger, who had something to do with Rax (143-144), her little chat with her friend Phillipa’s aunt Miri (241-242) or the quick, unsatisfying love-making with her white colleague Charles (249) that together trigger the impulse to counterpose her racialised identity and give up the subterfuge, the deception and breach of trust? Or is home, where she longs to
return, “to the quietness of no.10 because no one would be home, to the lingering smells of onions, and crawl into bed” (253)? Or is it the combined memory of Mamaji’s stories (3.4) and the old value system her parents so aggressively and repetitively endorse that made her destroy the Vhs copy of Kathi’s taped life-story? Perhaps it is a combination of all this, but her action frees her from a burden, the burden of guilt of being a collaborator in infringing on someone’s privacy for the sake of career, money and cheap publicity. She thus repudiates all claims of loyalty to Madeline, who had anyway hijacked the film away from her earlier; when she had skewed the interview towards the direction she wanted, without even consulting Angie. Angie leaves her job and thinks of returning to her enjoyable job as a waitress: running away from Soho, she can reclaim the pubs and clubs of the rest of London. She seems to have come to a new frontier, a new space and time in her own life: her immigrant status looks to seize this new space on her own terms, along with her West Indian friend driving a friend’s Porsche, she laughs into a world liberated from the slavishness of her job, which involved kowtowing to her American boss Madeline.

Angie’s transmission from the world of television to the known world of London, its pubs and clubs, full of life and vigour, involves a negotiation of the negative effects of competitive materialism, the cutthroat competitive culture of the urban metropolis, as against the idea of India so valorized by Mamaji and her parents. Set against the seemingly anti-feminist culture of her origin, (references to “Lakshimi” [sic] T: 48, 55, 56) Angie looks up to her own idea of independent and self-reliant womanhood as the source of inspiration. From taking pride in her brown skin, knowing her skill in handling people, Angie moves into a position of power over her self, rather than allow slavish control of the industry over her talent and researching skills. Thus this text shows the BrAsian woman to actively resist being coopted into the pressures of hungry unethical capitalism, in the form of producing reality shows about people’s private lives. She does this by drawing sustenance from transnational influences of respectable values and culture, from human agents like her friends, her uncle and parents, and from the very fact of being a confident young Londoner, a BrAsian reinscribing herself into the diasporic community she earlier rejected, ready to take on the world on her own strength.

Tania (LI), another television and film researcher, is used by her boss, to be a native informant, and make a film on Asian relationships as if on a reality show: she films her friends, her community members, family, everyone, in their most intimate
moments of revelation, and makes the film a big success. But Tania had compromised even her personal identity as friend or fellow Asian for the sake of British mainstream television. She is alienated from her friends and community even further for breach of trust and privacy as she finds out from the response of her friends (174-180). It becomes difficult for Tania to resist being coopted into the ethnicised project because she is ambitious, rebellious, and hesitant to give up her attractive, promising, hybrid identity. When she makes the film on Asian relationships, she is not able to say “no” to Jonathan, her elderly boss. After she made the film, Tania, as an “Asian babe kicking ass” (LI 250) was indeed the current hot property behind the television scene, as her agent Mark observed. She got several offers, her prospective employers Fay and Rory calculated when they employed her in their up market company:

It was what they had expected, after all, why they had taken her on. Cheeky bit of exotic, her intellect a huge plus, photogenic enough to be flirted with, brainy enough to backhand the compliments with panache. So satisfying, to meet someone who sent the clichés tumbling like dominoes (LI 255).

With her long hair, looks of a sultry goddess, well fitted out clothes and accessories, Tania presents the new face of Asian chic. Pnina Werbner’s (2004) article on this issue has similar references. Werbner also sounds highly objectionable, and very much like Tania’s agent (LI 255) when she refers to good-looking Asian women in the media in Britain:

Dressed elegantly in the latest fashions, gorgeous-looking young women welcome equally young, beautiful men; they kiss Italian style on both cheeks and, reclining in BBC armchairs, chat wittily in impeccable English with only slight regional traces—London, Birmingham, Manchester. (2004: 902)

But what is of greater interest is that Tania is, because of her confident attitude and good looks, again about to be coerced into exploiting her ethnicity. Her case strongly places the “us” and “them” divide that is tearing the so-called ideology of multiculturalism into an assortment of diverse assimilationist strands with new patterns in each new place. She is the much-needed contact between the television channel she works for, and the hidden world of the Asians in Britain, who can be spied upon voyeuristically, but not looked in the eye across the fence or at the street corner. Tania sarcastically asks her interviewers “the viewers... love seeing innocent people making complete arses of themselves, don’t they? “ (LI 251) , and she was immediately dismissed from the room. Tania briefly recollects her father’s friend’s sudden arrival to return a favour after many years, and the value of friendship and
community gave her “an answer”, a “revelation”, “if she could just dig deeper” (258), and she finally decided not to allow her Asianness be exploited by the mainstream media. So, when Mark, her agent, suggested that she work on the Jasbinder Singh case, in which a BrAsian woman’s ex-husband set fire to the car in which he shut himself up with their children, Tania refuses to do any more Asian stories, “No more grubbing in the ghetto, I’m mainstream now” (258). Even authorial strategy takes the focus off from Tania as the aggressive centre of action, and makes her appear as a gentler person, trying to atone for the sins of her fictional character, by taking care of her dying father, giving up her white lover and Deepak, stealing his passport so that he cannot escape from the country with his and Chila’s son. But she is no longer the glorious protagonist of the novel, the space is usurped by “soft in the head” Chila. Tania’s refusal to do any more films that delve into her ethnicity and the privacy of her culture is rewarded by her renewed friendship with Sunita and Chila, and the diaspora community accepting her after her father’s death, consoling her, standing by her in a gesture of solidarity while he was cremated (332-4). Thus even Tania writes herself back into her diasporic subjectivity: she had nearly disowned her BrAsian existence, she used it only to further her career, and later, values it for its resilience, its capacity to renew bonds, alter lives and give hope to live.

R. Radhakrishnan has interesting things to say about this kind of divide that multiculturalism actually implies in postcolonial societies, of which Tania becomes a victim:

If colonialism in its heyday instituted a kind of hegemonic awareness of an Us-Them divide, in the postcolonial situation “they” are “here” with “us” in the very heart of metropolitan contemporaneity; Algerians in France, Islamic neighborhoods in London, Indo-Pakistani-Bangladeshi presence in England, and a variety of “ethnic” and immigrant life-worlds within the heartland of Euro-America.(2004: 32)

Radhakrishnan expresses his impatience with the endless diversity seminars, workshops, training sessions in academia and the corporate sector which thrive on the proliferation of difference, as if difference has to be interpreted by the first world as they claim:

in our laboratories of significance (they need our coding); and furthermore, we don’t need to explain to them who we are or why we are who we are. The onus of intelligibility is on them as immigrants, diasporans, and ethnic, and thank God we are here to effect that translation into mainstream sovereignty. (ibid)

When Pnina Werbner writes on generational conflict in South Asian migrant
communities, she is possibly reading the more accessible, aggressively published commercially viable stereotypical romance fiction about arranged marriage and intergenerational conflict, written by Nair or Minhas, (see Chapter One section 1.4) published in the first five or six years of the new millennium. She fails to discuss in detail serious South Asian British fiction by women authors nor the powerful short films made by BrAsians, nor does she mention theatre, dance and the visual arts which contribute so much to the critical engagement on identity and hybridity. The performing arts and fiction challenge pat generalizations about either the younger or older generations of BrAsians and the equation between them. Werbner ignores a major group of BrAsian writers when she makes these statements about South Asian popular cultural output.

Carmen Faymonville (2002) writes about how South Asian diaspora women writers in America, portray their protagonists as trying to negotiate their identities by often moving away from the cities, away from pressures of urban life and consumerist excess into the Wild West, the frontiers, to Mexico and Arizona. Feroza Ginwalla, in Bapsi Sidhwa’s *American Brat* (1993) and Jasmine in Bharati Mukherjee’s eponymous novel (1989), “are actively involved in the reshaping of American identities in the location of the American West” (Faymonville 248). To the writers, the American West is a “literary landscape” which offers an “ideological space” for portraying clashes of culture and writing transformational narratives (ibid). The subcontinental diaspora writers portray women protagonists choosing to live in urban spaces, in less “Asian” settlement areas, in small West Coast towns. Jasmine chooses to integrate fully by giving up her Indian values and, paradoxically, looks to fulfil her material wants and emotional hopes in the largely mythical West, the frontiers of which are supposed to indicate a closure, an end of adventure. Feroza becomes the American Brat by settling in Denver, not surrendering her Parsee identity, and living in the cosmopolitan space, which enables her to “transcend nationalism or roots in the narrow sense of the word” (260).

Both first generation migrants to America, these South Asian women negotiate rooting and rerouting in cultural terms, by resisting impulses to assimilate into capitalist’s paradise in the visibly upmarket eastern towns and cities, and going west to discover its mythical power. Atima Srivastava’s Angie has also refused to comply with the capitalist forces, but unlike Bharati Mukherjee’s Jasmine, or Bapsi Sidhwa’s Feroza, who claim new frontiers in the wild, Western America away from
metropolitan centres, Angie (T) must now move away from the film and television circuit of Soho into the rest of the city which she knows so well. For her, and the author, the ideological space, and the transformatory literary landscape has to be London, which allows for a multiplicity of experiences. Similarly, Tania (LI) can now repudiate her boss’ indirect threats, and the hints her prospective employers give for her future prospects: she refuses to be an ethnic go-between, an agent, a native informant of the private sorrows of her community’s life for the consumption of white British and others. Her private space is now the home, the hospital where her father is, and friends’ houses, places she can now claim as her own as opposed to the “plush offices” in high rise buildings in which she had recently “been sashaying through smoked-glass doors” (249).

Sometimes, crises of a personal nature trouble protagonists in their upward career path, and it is then that they seek agency from different dimensions of their gendered geography. The following texts show how, mostly artists and creative BrAsians of the second-generation, suffer anxieties that only they can surmount, by several resourceful means, and mainly, by asserting their BrAsian identities.

Mira (LFM) has to accommodate the twin identities of herself as a family person, a much-loved girl from the Indian community with a horde of family friends, “Visiting Gods” who came from Delhi and reigned in her parents’ hospitality, and a writer, a gregarious Londoner with a motley crowd of men and women friends of all kinds, a white British lover and an elderly BrAsian man with whom she has a sexual relationship. When she is busy writing a novel, her lover Luke leaves her, and she falls in love with the older man, Amrit. Halfway through the writing process, Mira finds herself pregnant with Amrit’s child, and her decision to abort it shatters her. Through building up an absorbing Bildungsroman, Atima Srivastava shows how the quiet strength of the city and the resilience of the community bring Mira back to grips with life. At the book-launch party, when she slipped out into the snow, she felt as though she “had crossed an impasse” (211), and “A great rush of emotion came over me. I realized I had a past. I wasn’t just alive. I had lived. I had seen things. I was connected to people. The journey had only just begun” (ibid). She had started feeling that “dependance is not a hindrance. Sometimes it could be one’s only support” (207), when her parents generated so much of interest from the community for the book launch, and “revelled in my life being braided with their lives”, and she feels “lucky”, to be “so close and near and driven to distraction by the ones I loved” (ibid). Through
parents, relatives, friends and lovers, Mira finds reason to live and the need to survive. Thus *Looking for Maya* becomes, like its title, mysteriously, a novel about self-discovery, and acceptance of a repudiated past, a crisscross of uncles, aunties, “Visiting Gods” and good friends who all together make life happen in a city vibrant with life, rather than the story of the struggle of a writer with her first novel. As Cecile Sandten observes:

Srivastava leaves the immigrant experience and racism far at bay, and engages with the social and cultural as well as personal struggle of her characters, whether Indian, African, Jamaican or English, having them cross-over to any destination suitable to their personal success and careers:....Srivastava manages to get around the term hybridity, by leaving it behind as a scientific category to group, class and list. (2005)

Comparing Hanif Kureishi and Srivastava in this article, Sandten suggests that while Kureishi has hybridized the diaspora situation in his novels and films, “Srivastava has got even beyond this”. To take this analogy further, Srivastava has perhaps given the true essence of multicultural life as it should be lived and enjoyed; not scarred with racist abuse, disempowerment of men and women, not generating conflict out of but celebrating uniqueness and difference.

*Gypsy Masala* (2000) has the second-generation girl Evita moving out into the world on the strength of her belief in herself: she wished to become an actress (*GM* 194) but her uncle Bali and aunt Sheila always wanted an arranged marriage, and they “arranged” for the BrAsian lawyer Avinash Kavan to marry her (80). Her discovery of his infidelity made her more resolute: after a brief relationship with Noberg Dian she went to New York and joined the Academy of Arts to fulfil her dreams of becoming an actor (184). Her sudden transformation shows how the author locates cognitive agency with repudiation of transnational loyalties, in this case through “arranged” marriage, and the need to secure one’s future: Evita realises that security can only come from within, from her identity as a young Londoner, a BrAsian in the diaspora, not under patriarchal control, or through marriage. The call of the gypsy, a metaphor of restlessness in the modern woman/man is what Evita heeds, and through her own engagement with her future, brings happiness to her adoptive parents and herself. In fact her aunt Sheila follows her example and leaves for Nevada, following her own dream, and returns to a more meaningful relationship with her husband Bali, after a long, strained, empty marriage (194). In this case, the “mother” learns from the “daughter”, their experiences of self-discovery unite the family to a better
understanding instead of separating them or tying them to each other in sterile bonds, gripped by the fear of “loneliness and rejection” (188). America again acts as a new space for locating and fulfilling their wishes, a space offering clarity as in "Bend it Like Beckham, A Sin of Colour, One Hundred Shades of White."

Nisha Minhas (CC) describes Naina, another Punjabi girl from London, who is a young group manager of a large insurance company, but issues of her career are not discussed in the novel at all: Naina, her girlfriends the white British Kate and the BrAsian Leena, are all looking out for sexual adventure, the focus is only on marriage, titillation of the partner and pre-marital sex. Pnina Werbner’s description of South Asian popular fiction befits this novel, and the following one&, but Werbner excludes from her focus several of those novels which focus on career, home, society as contributing to identity construction, rather than marriage or sex.

Preethi Nair’s Beyond Indigo (2004) describes the double life led by Nina Savani, the daughter of East African Sindhi parents, leaves her lawyer’s job her parents are proud of; agrees to an arranged marriage to ward off her parents’ “list-system” of matchmaking, and takes up her hobby of painting in secret. Her paintings as “Foruki”, a fictitious Japanese avant-garde painter succeed, she exhibits, enjoys fame as “Foruki”’s agent and “Foruki” is awarded the Turner prize that year. Breaking the subterfuge at last, she is united with her parents and her long lost sister, she breaks off her engagement and finds love with a handsome Irish man. Though there are occasional, generalised, affective discussions on Nina’s career as an artist, the novel only develops a supercilious critique of BrAsian arranged marriage and degenerates into a popular romance. As discussed in Chapter One section 1.15, this plan of publicising her own work and winning an award for it is what the author did for her book Gypsy Masala, for which she became very popular. The distinct difference between her earlier novels and this one lies in the disparaging comments about BrAsians of the older generation: their accent and misuse of articles; their love for modernity through material things like money, houses, cars and gadgets; their poor dresss sense and the entire BrAsian matrimonial industry. Reading through this novel, one cannot but help comparing it with the earlier creative output of Nair, in which both BrAsian and British characters are humanely portrayed, with a controlled artistic respect and distance maintained by the same author. Dictates of publishing houses and personal choice must collude, only then can a novel with such negative bias emerge, which provokes judgement from serious scholars of BrAsian culture like Pnina Werbner.
The story of the BrAsian entrepreneur Nalini (OHSW) also mentions her daughter’s career as designer. Maya is successful as a fashion designer, working with Enrique, whom she had met abroad, and who believes in her capabilities enough to give her charge of his London store, till later she finds her own outlets on her own. Maya’s childhood obsession with dressing her dolls and her friends turns into a creative impulse for designing in her adulthood. Though she stays in London, she lives in Europe for a while, almost deciding to marry and live there, goes back to India in search of her grandmother and childhood memories, searches for her father in the U.S. and finally returns to the fold of the family, childhood sweetheart and step-father. Maya resumes the diaspora subjectivity she had temporarily rejected, for a fascination for Britishness and Europe, forgetful of the influence of both her mother’s and Maggie’s guidance. Her career flourishes because of the touch of the exotic in her use of colour and fabric, and the hard work she can put in, the twin impulses, which make BrAsians of the second generation so successful in creative fields (Shada Islam 98).

A wicked Old Woman, published in 1987, shows how British women, older and younger, allied with white, black African or Caribbean British women, support each other for several causes, specially physical torture and racist hate crimes, discrimination at work and at other public places. Through processes of deculturation, many of these women find themselves acculturated, and like Kulwant, are drawn closer to the fractured identity of the hybrid engaged in locating herself against the mainstream. By coming out of their homes, they are able to reach out to women disadvantaged positions. Wearing western clothes, attending meetings, speaking out or making posters and placards, are the markers of deculturation among these otherwise conservative Punjabi women. Only after using suitable methods of deculturation, they are able to rally around each other, providing security and agency to their troubled sisters, and finding a selfhood, which they had lost in domestic commitment, struggle against diversity and poverty. Thus finding a niche for themselves in British society to which they must acculturate for reasons of survival, these women from diverse backgrounds seek a wholeness, which they can claim as liberating and as guarantee of their human agency. Throughout the text there is the recurrent image of sailing, across streams, seas and oceans, in ships or boats, to represent the immigrant experience, as in “We may be sailing in different boats but the sea is the same” and “We’re in different boats, on different seas, and they see monsters and nightmares in our sea and
they get frightened and want to pull the plug” (48).

Kulwant’s stick, her “shuffle-shuffle-stick-shuffle” gait becomes a metaphor for the several transformations she and the other women in the text undergo. Kulwant is really in a dilemma regarding her identity at one point: her friends treat her like someone special, yet she feels she wants to belong without having to change what she really is. At school she is made much of, as she is very good at maths, “which had been drilled into her from the day she’d started school, maths being considered one of the foundation stones of education: if you weren’t much good at maths you weren’t much good at anything, was the general belief” (49). She suddenly became, from being helpless and dependent, “the brain box, the eastern genius” (ibid) etc. Kulwant ended her brilliant career abruptly, got married, had children and later, briefly indulged in political activity, joining the Labour Party along with her white friend Caroline, and having a romantic interlude with the younger white man, Mark (115-117). It is not until she sends her husband out to live with Kurshid, she being older, a grandmother, that she adopts her disguise as an old white woman, crippled and mad, to start living on the streets and find the truth about life which seemed to have left her wanting for more. It is almost as though Kuli had entered the vanaprastha stage of her life, wherein she must renounce life in order to have lived a fuller existence.

In fact, Kulwant finds out that women like Ammi, Shanti, Big Sister are helping other deprived women, mostly Asian, who are tortured or neglected, harassed or discriminated against, and she joins their group. She learns that educated women like Maya, the researcher, Pavan, her daughter-in-law, a doctor, Shazia a young girl, and many others across class and religion had all united against the shared background of the pain of immigrant women, to provide a healing touch to their fellow sufferers. Kulwant seems to find a meaning in life, strangely, with the example of even her white daughter-in-law, Shirley, who wanted her children to treasure the Indian part of their background, their father having once rejected it. The Asian center becomes a hub of activity, and Kulwant is drawn into the active life of the political and social worker. Kulwant decides to act in Maya’s film on Asian women’s mental health. She would pretend or act as if she were mentally deranged, instead of Maya having to look for such a real-life subject for her film, like Tania, compromising the privacy of someone from her community. Thus Kulwant she does make a career out of her disguise, and for a good purpose, for commitment to social work for BrAsians rather than her endless, self-obsessed search for identity. Kuli’s life as a diasporic subject adds a
wholeness to her confused life lived in two halves as it were.

Social workers often have to deal with drifters among BrAsian women, who may be young girls as Rahila Gupta portrays Zara in “Leaving Home”, the unnamed protagonist of Randhawa’s “Games”, and Suki and her sister in “War of the Worlds”, all stories from Right of Way (1988), and women like Kulwant and Rani/Rosalind (AWOW).

4.4 Findings:

Transnational Subjectivities.

A common thread that runs through these texts is that of transnational subjectivities of the characters, which temporarily affects their behaviour in engaging with the materialistic realities of their profession or job. This engagement becomes much more pronounced in their relationships with the opposite sex, which is the focus of the next chapter, but here, it is important to note how BrAsian female subjectivities are shaped by a somewhat tenuous link with the presence of India in their minds, or the value system India implies, which is lodged in their minds through the collective memory of the community, even in the workplace. Tania, Mira, Angie, Maya, are all affected by community bonding and common cultures shared across families and homes in different neighbourhoods, even countries. They acknowledge the strange ways in which the transnational community’s presence offers them security in distress, calmness in troubled times, as discussed in the earlier sections. It is only then that they are able to take control of their lives as BrAsians, valuing both aspects of their identity as inseparable, incomparable parts of their diasporic identities. Sunetra Gupta’s upper class heroines in all her novels are not second-generation BrAsians but sojourners who are carrying their transnational baggage with them, intact. What provides them support is, again, transnational culture: songs of Tagore (MR), memories of plays or films seen in Calcutta, (ASC) loving family bonds shaped in their childhood or adolescence, (ASC, MR, MIM) friendships that withstand long testing times (MIM). The knowledge that there is home somewhere, if they ever change their minds about staying in the UK, makes their engagement with the social realities of late migration or sojourn bearable. Gupta’s female protagonists, usually very superior intellectuals, are highly successful in their careers as well, and yet they are restless, lusting after love or adventure, which they often find elusive in opposition to their secure transnational
possessions and relationships. Their defiance of social codes, their daring adventurous spirit makes them inheritors of the new urban, metropolitan way of life that refuses to be confined to one place, tribal or national identity. They reject the easy lure of adopting non-confrontational, traditional modes of existence: instead they adopt their diasporic identity, defined by citizenship and community, neighbourhood and network of friends across race and nationality.

Variety Of Labour.

The sheer variety of the economic positions and careers of migrant Asian women’s lives in Britain are traced in these texts, mediated through the memory and value judgement of the authors, who actually lived through most of these experiences themselves or vicariously underwent some of them. The capabilities of BrAsian women in accordance with their chosen profession, opportunities available or denied to them, and future prospects ahead of them. The texts offer new ways of looking at the socio-economic status of BrAsian women and how that helps construct their and their family’s and community’s identity, moving away from stereotypes to challenging new expressions of subjecthood. They reveal the agonizing processes of birthing of the identity of the BrAsian woman at work, the constant between loyalties to self and community, to the home and whatever it represents, and the workplace as it happens in most developing nations. In a way it is useful to examine BrAsian societal norms for women at work, through these texts, especially for young aspirants who wish to base their careers in the U.K. It is interesting to observe how the texts reveal the tremendous urge of the BrAsian protagonist to transform their lives and assume power in the society and the workplace on the basis of their own merit, talent and drive, negating the stereotypes about BrAsian women as weak or as culturally backward, therefore unlikely to perform as well as her white normative peer.

What these texts reveal are unique areas of the BrAsian woman’s experience at work, and at home in response to her job or career outside. The texts dealing with the first-generation working woman show how respectability, or izzat, mediates between the image of an ideal wife/mother and a working wife/mother. When the newly migrated brides are either uneducated or untrained for any other than unskilled labour, they face many problems in the society which does not admit their transnational respectable status. This often happens due to the colonial influence in the subcontinent, e.g. letting girls graduate with English or History honours, which renders them unemployable unless they are very talented or are also trained to teach.
In the novel *Haven’t Stopped Dancing Yet* by Shyama Perera, the writer of Sri Lankan origin who has been referred to before, this is discussed in detail, as in *One Hundred Shades of White* by Preethi Nair or Sunetra Gupta’s *Memories of Rain*. Among respectable uneducated women of the less affluent classes, the problem of finding suitable work outside the house is still more acute. For a Muslim woman from a conservative background, the need to earn money for helping her natal family is indeed difficult, but must often be done, with concealment and subterfuge if necessary, as Qaiser’s mother does, or as Sophia, Raisa’s mother (RB) has to. After some hesitation, Nazneen (BL) takes up sewing at home at her husband’s insistence, much like the other women in the neighbourhood whom she had looked initially down upon. Hindu women of uneducated background from more conservative East African Asian communities echo the same feeling of hesitation as well, like Sumitra’s mother in the Patel household in *Sumitra’s Story*. The chronological account of the texts which reveal such problems should help theorise the gaps left in framing a comprehensive narrative of the BrAsian woman’s identity in contemporary scholarship which often uses outdated statistics, ignores transnational class loyalties, regions of origin, and social mores. One of the other problems is that such theorisation uses the mainstream experience as the norm or control for the BrAsian woman, despite the incomparability of variables in their respective socialisations. The efforts of the Equal Opportunity Commission, the Commission for Racial Equality and the Race Relations Institute suggest new inroads being made in involving employers to break the stereotypes about Black and Asian women, which is definitely a positive step forward, but a small step indeed.

**Domestic Labour.**

Most of the texts show how the working woman’s husband is usually the one to ask her to work, or give consent if she offers to. However, the domestic workload remains the same, much as it is in most dual-earner families in the subcontinent, in many other third world countries as well as in Europe and the West, as G.N. Ramu (1989) shows. The texts also show how the children, specially the daughters, help the mother in sharing the domestic chores, whereas some highlight the daughters’ indifference to the mother’s outwork and the double strain it causes her. Some of the texts detail the reasons for, and the expression of, the mothers’ trauma of going out to work which the writers have integrated with the daughters’ understanding of it. As third world feminists assert in various discussions, the daughters, or other women
(like Meena’s Nanima in AM, Maggie in OHSW) provide support and succour to the mother whenever possible. The daughter’s own rebellion is shaped against the mother’s repressed social life, but, despite her sympathy it does not always give the mother any taste of freedom: often, the daughter leaves home, leaving the mother reinscribed in her inferior social position, along with having to be blamed for the daughter’s rebellion by the community. It is as if the daughter reaps unacknowledged benefits from the mother’s outwork, not realizing the significance of this experience, guiltily dismissing or refusing to publicly acknowledge her own involvement in determining the mother’s position in the household, and yet strongly differentiating between her own and her mother’s generation. The mother, if at all, only develops cognitive agency during her exposure to the power structure outside home, she is not shown in the texts to develop corporal agency on her own, she needs support of more than one person, usually a male and a female. The daughter, usually the protagonist of these Bildungsromans, on the other hand, develops both cognitive and corporal agency during her stay at home, going to study or work, enough to want to leave home (Sumitra, Mala) or to stay on, but remain independent of domestic responsibility, drawn into a self-centred discovery of freedom (Angie, Mira, Tania, Maya). Thus the dual involvement of the mothers in paid labour and domestic and reproductive labour finds her overburdened, tired and frustrated as her freedom is severely compromised in the power geometry which defines the limits of her dual life at home and at work.

**Multiplicity of Experience: Tradition/Modernity.**

The second generation BrAsian portrayed in the novels of the sample is usually loyal and emotionally attached to her parents, not constantly in “conflict” as suggested by the observers in the British academy and outside, though she often refuses to acknowledge the claims on her independence. The expectations of the mother or the older generation do torment her in ways similar to the ones found in other transnational Asian communities, like the Asian Americans Claire Chow (1998) writes about, but the second-generation Indian career woman is found to have a clearly oppositional identity to hegemonies of oppression. Such a young BrAsian woman is bold and strong, determined, well read and ambitious to succeed against all odds as opposed to her early immigrant counterparts. Her identity is constructed along the lines of modernity: she is an educated member of the BrAsian family, who, by her entry into the labour force, is expected to raise the standards of not only her natal
family, but the family she marries into. By her lifestyle, dress and talent, she must be an admirable person in the society which is a matter of pride of the family (Ramji: 2004), and she must associate with the right friends, marry into a similar respectable family which would reap benefits from her modernity, her education and career, to assume a yet higher position in society as it happens in South Asia as well (Mankekar 1999; Ramji 2003; Ahmad 2003).

Thus, transnational notions of respectability, class related aspiration to modernity, and desire to uphold a distinctly BrAsian identity are differentially experienced by the mothers and daughters portrayed in these *Bildungsroman* texts: the older generation is limited, not by aspiration but by notions of respectability and domesticity, whereas the younger generation lets the burden of transnational cultural norms sit lightly on her shoulders, creating BrAsian norms to be adopted selectively at home, and at work, negotiating not only duality but a “multiplicity” of experience in their lives. Shaminder Takhar’s (2003) words become very appropriate to the allegation of BrAsian women leading a “dual life”, torn between tradition and modernity in dressing:

> I would argue that although Asian women may feel a sense of dislocation and displacement, recognizing multiplicity of experience and the ability of women to occupy several contexts simultaneously helps us to move away from the notion of a fragmented self to a multi-layered self, a self that temporarily and strategically fixes certain forms of identity, outside the traditional/modern dichotomy ((2003: 220).

**Intergenerational Difference.**

The texts draw similar but unique pictures of the older women doing outside work, and varied portraits of the younger generation at work. Claire Chow (1998) finds a few common characteristics about Asian American women in the labour sector, they are less showy, less demanding, take blame (unfair even) easily, hesitant to ask for a raise, unassertive, take less credit, and cannot say no. In most of the cases surveyed here, we find some of these characteristics to be true, in both generations of women. But the older generation’s contribution towards making their daughters successful in their careers should be highlighted. The mother’s sacrifice of her personal freedom, to encourage her to fulfil her dreams, is a common observation across all the texts. Thus, though for the older, uneducated woman in the labour market, the exposure to the world of outwork is very painful, it confers cognitive, though not always corporal agency across gendered axes of power: she can think of ways to alleviate her daughter’s misery against discrimination, she can take her family
forward in their aspirations, she can have some control over their financial resources. The texts offer possibilities of new theorisation on the family structure as they probe into the nuanced relationships in dual-earner families between spouses, and between mothers and children, especially daughters. In these contemporary texts, new forms of gendered geographies of power exist: education and access to westernised modes of life give agency to daughters, whose mothers remain reinscribed in their roles, and are often exploited by their grown-up daughters instead of their enjoying their support and positive intervention. The mother’s domestic work is taken for granted; the daughter usually undermines its importance, though she expects everything to be “done” without her involvement. She displays a modern, urban value system that would reject painstaking methods of cooking and consume processed food, and yet express relish and desire for “home-cooked” food, where the home is an other exploitative site for the mother, after her outwork or piecework (for instance, Naina and Angie). The educated modern young woman’s collusion with patriarchal principles becomes evident in their erasing their mother’s labour at times, and enjoying its fruits at others.

However, there is often profound sympathy on the part of the daughter (SS, LI, OHSW); an element of guilt or responsibility in having perpetrated part of the mother’s suffering (OHSW, LI); invariably, an abandonment of childhood loyalties (OHSW, LI, SS, HSDY) and occasionally an attempt to express through irony, humour or sarcasm the paradoxical position of the mother as upholder of traditional authority with limited power (SS, AM, LI, HSDY, BI). What Pnina Werbner writes about intergenerational conflict as the main source of entertainment or focus of assessment in the portrayal of BrAsian lives in film, comedy series or other popular cultural products (2004) is not applicable in the case of this body of fiction, which has its emphasis on sympathy, understanding, and sharing rather than mockery or sarcasm. Instead of intergenerational conflict there may be difference, to use Avtar Brah’s term, and difference can be easily “negotiated and managed in such a way as to favour understanding and shared perspectives” (2006: 54).

Employer Attitude.

There is a distinct pattern of employer attitudes described carefully by the BrAsian novelists, in case of both the generations of BrAsian women at work. Whether it is Raisa’s mother Sophia, or Raisa herself, Angie or Tania or Heera, the BrAsian woman is often subjected to the whimsicality of the employer who would
like to discriminate at the slightest show of assertiveness. At her workplace she is just a name, often newly conferred for the sake of pronounceability, thus she loses her respectable identity as someone’s wife, daughter, or mother, or a member of her community, when she enters the labour market \((RB, OHSW)\). She must override all status and language barriers to perform for long hours, in conditions that provoke ill health, and perform the kind of work, which lowers her self-esteem \((RB, HSDY)\). To please the men in power, their husbands and their employers, they lose out on health, peace of mind and personal freedom and yet find no recognition or reward for their efforts \((SS, RB, LI, HSDY)\). The younger women find their ethnic origin viewed in paradoxical ways: in the media and the arts \((Nina in BI, Angie in T)\). Though culturally exciting, their ethnicity tends to be a negative qualification in research or academics, unless for specially dedicated ethnicity-related projects \((Tania in LI, Raisa in RB)\). Often their sexual attractiveness becomes the reason why they are preferred as assistants to white British employers, like the narrator in “Pedal Push”, Tania \((LI\), Angie \((T\), Sumitra \((SS)\).

### 4.5 Conclusion: Survival Strategies.

Survival strategies adopted by the BrAsian working women differ according to class, aspiration and community and family influence, and they are linked with homing desires, as discussed in Chapter Five. In the short stories in the authors portray working class women students, who aspire towards a good career but are controlled by forces that disrupt their aims somewhat, whereas some of the novels \((HJ, FS, AM, HSDY, LI, OHSW, CS, GM)\) deal with women of ‘respectable’ families from the working class aiming to rise to the upper class by education and their career choice, and partially successful in doing so. While Tania makes short television films and has a successful career, she is ruined in the personal front, Sunita is into legal social work as a failed law student, but she goes back to studying law finally. Maya \((OHSW)\) is a designer who goes through a major relationship with a Spaniard and yet fears commitment until she rediscovers her love for a childhood BrAsian friend, Suri. Even Hari-jan, Mala, Anita and Sita, Evita face frequent disruptions in their career on their way to the higher standard they have set for themselves: but this does not deter them from the pursuit of happiness which for them usually means a successful career, marriage and social acceptance.
Much of this type of survival tactics is definitely a result of the community or family support which the protagonists recount from time to time, something which they have time and again watched in their community. Ram Gidoomal (1997) writes that South Asians are indeed successful businessmen, especially those from East Africa, as Chila’s parents are in this novel: “They are skilled at identifying niche markets and unexploited trading opportunities. They have to be, for in a competitive society slanted against immigrants, being good is not enough: you have to be better” (42). He also says “Many South Asians – for example, many from East Africa – take pride in being self-sufficient, often choosing not to take up state funding sources and preferring instead to utilize family and ethnic relationships” (44). Gidoomal believes that instead of pinning down their success as a result of “success genes”, one should think about the resourcefulness, impact of kinship and contact, and the ability to be motivated by problems as the keys to their success. He writes:

They have a knack of successful entrepreneurship and running businesses that work. When they have sought their future in a foreign land, they will be unusually talented and resilient...They are motivated by problems. They know the ropes: how to avoid paperwork and intermediaries. They get the job done legally yet quickly, by maintaining good relations and paying dues on time. (51-54)

The combined impact of these factors are found translated in the life-skills of the BrAsian women and their families scattered across the texts (HJ, AWOW, AM, LI) two generations of successful Indians whose contact with India is now tenuous, mediated through film and television, even telephone calls and the occasional visit mentioned less and less. The second-generation authors like Randhawa and Syal are looking inwards into such a community: such families as have never really had a strong community support from the kin back in India unlike some of the other characters studied here, eg Sunetra Gupta’s heroines, or Atima Srivastava’s protagonists. These families are Indian in origin, but removed by generations and often two-fold migrations, and now they are British Asians of the 1990s. Their daughters are members of a diaspora community, as much in business as in pleasure, family-life and social exchange. Their daughters know, that in order to survive in the country they have adopted, they have to discover many layers in their allegedly hybrid identities which they learn to validate differentially in specific situations. These multiple layers of their identity enables them to resist stereotypes of ethnicity that demand them to showcase certain aspects of themselves, and they continue to create new diasporic selves in their gendered geographies of power.