Chapter Two.

The Home and the Child: Negotiating “Gendered Geographies of Power”

2 Introduction.

The second chapter deals with the depiction of childhood in the novels and short fiction selected, with a reference to the genre of the Bildungsroman generally adopted by the writers. The narrative techniques of the writers is introduced in the first section, followed by their central positioning of the home in the texts, according to the conceptual framework of “gendered geographies of power”. In this chapter, the equations of power in the social and geographical spaces accessible to the BrAsian girl-child, primarily, will be examined to see how they are solved, and how BrAsian women’s identity is formed in these “first”, intimate social spaces. The chosen temporal frame of this section is the 1960s and 70s the frame of the “integration” phase following the “assimilation” phase according to liberalist political thought (Brah 1996: 23-25), which made little difference to the way the mainstream configured the BrAsian.

The second section shows how in this time-frame, parents act as extensions of the middle or working class BrAsian home in urban England, and the influence they and the extended family have on the child’s mind and memory. The British system of school education and how the BrAsian children, again, primarily girls, adapt to it is discussed next in the third section, followed by a reference to racism in schools in section four. A variety of responses to racism is also analysed here, and the focus shifts in section five to friendship and bonding, despite and alongside racism. Examples of assimilative efforts from some of the child protagonists are compared in section six with those well-shaped strategies of others, who reject both the mainstream as well as the community’s transnational cultural claims, as some of the texts depict. Some conclusions offered by the texts on the formation of ideas of selfhood, belonging and nationhood through the mediation of individual and collective memory, and narrative strategy are discussed in the seventh and last section of this chapter. Thus the chapter focuses on the growth and development of a distinctive identity of the BrAsian girl-child in an urban middle and working class milieu, in the family, and away from the home, especially in the school, formed across gendered geographies of these spaces, negotiating the thin line between the transnational homeland and the desire for the “home” in the diaspora space of Britain.
The major texts discussed in this chapter have a substantial depiction of the childhood of the female protagonists, in Britain, as first or second-generation immigrants in the 1960s and 70s, usually in chronological order of publication. Sometimes exceptions are made if a specific issue is discussed with reference to historical time. Though Meera Syal’s semi-autobiographical novel *Anita and Me* appears in 1998, it traces historically, an earlier time than Ravinder Randhawa’s *Harijan*, published in 1992. Therefore issues of assimilation, possible integration and availability of a supportive community life are dealt with differently in the two texts, and they are discussed according to the real time-frame set by their respective authors. Other than these two major texts, there are references to the AWWC’s collections *Right of Way* (1988) and *Flaming Spirit* (1994), two collections of short stories and poems. *A Wicked Old Woman* (1994) by Ravinder Randhawa, which describes early years of immigration closely, from a first generation migrant’s point of view, offers insights into childhood of BrAsians in the 1960s. Syal’s other novel, *Life Isn’t all ha ha hee hee* (2000) centers around adult lives of three older women in London, but has valuable insights on parent-child relations, friendship and racism. Preethi Nair’s *One Hundred Shades of White* (2003) portrays childhood substantially, from the perspective of both a boy and a girl and their mother brought to London and abandoned by their father. Atima Srivastava’s novels *Transmission* (1992) and *Looking For Maya* (1999) occasionally glance backwards to the childhood of the adult protagonists Angie and Mira respectively, and these are referred to accordingly. References to other texts like Rukshana Smith’s *Sumitra’s Story* (1985), Farhana Sheikh’s *The Red Box* (1991) or Shyama Perera’s *Haven’t Stopped Dancing Yet* (1999) or Monica Ali’s *Brick Lane* (2004) are made, by way of comparison or contrast, as these works of South Asian writers not of Indian but East European, Pakistani, Sri Lankan and Bangladeshi origin also traverse similar life-stages in their works.

In this chapter, questions are asked about the way childhood influences shape a Brasian woman’s identity. Does the BrAsian second-generation woman develop her own sense of ability or individuality through education, in a substantially different way from those of mother or grandmother? Does memory have a role to play in building up her notion of self-hood? Does agency necessarily imply rebellion or a corporal act, like retaliating against racists, or does it involve something more cognitive, like freeing the mind of racist clutter of stereotypes? How does gender
construct both domestic space in childhood and memory or recollection in adulthood? These questions will be raised from time to time in this chapter.

2.1 Childhood As An Important Stage In All The Texts.

Childhood is the stage which finds the immigrant in one of the toughest of situations, caught between the double bind of the home, that is the space of belonging, with parents, siblings, relatives and the outside to which she aspires to belong, represented by the playground, the street and the school, among teachers, schoolmates and the mainstream community. For the BrAsian family of the 1960s-70s, life in England was still new as the families had joined the male migrants five to ten years after their migration (Ballard 2001: 18). For the children, some of whom were born in India, the experience of growing up in Britain was constantly mediated by their parents' own memories and expectations of childhood behaviour in their traditional homes. Moreover, there is the intersection of gender and class difference, which the child negotiated within the household and in the community, as well as gender, class, and racial stereotyping of BrAsians by the mainstream (Brah 2006). BrAsian children, whether of middle or working classes, were usually stereotyped in a binary of opposing traits: they were either seen as “bright” geniuses needing western guidance, or as lazy, unwilling, shy bodies cowering behind community norms and religious diktats (Ghuman 1999; Alexander 2006). The notion of high achievement among students of Indian origin as opposed to other subcontinental students is by now almost established, with the Bhikhu Parekh Report (2000) by the Runnymede Trust saying, “Indian pupils generally achieve results above the national average in both English and Maths at age eleven and sixteen” as Shompa Lahiri (2006) writes.

These stereotypes often freeze working class Hindu, Muslim, Pakistani or Bangladeshi children into irreversible positions devoid of agency or will to change (Shain 2006; Benjamin 2006). In this opening section of the chapter, the central focus is on childhood in the development of adult identity among BrAsian children, especially girls, in Britain, seen through familial surroundings and social spaces like the school, both of which demand high performance levels despite sociocultural barriers.

One of the axes of the representational scheme of the authors is the key role of the family in providing security to the child in the face of a strange, if not
occasionally hostile world outside. The other is the outside space that the child encounters more and more everyday, independently sometimes, in which the BrAsians are expected to assimilate or integrate without transforming British society by their presence. Many of the novels mentioned above, as well as the short stories, centre on generational differences and some amount of struggle for power within the limited territory of the child’s world. In most South Asian productions in the entertainment industry, whether it is the popular television show, film or novel, often “it is evident that the most pointed satirical barbs and critical messages contained in these works are directed much closer to home. The real audience targeted by the diasporic intellectuals who create these films and satirical shows is their parents and peers” (Werbner 2004: 901). But this is not to say that the same barb or critical message is not directed at the self, or the mainstream community as well, which Werbner does not focus on at all, or that there is no portrayal of emotional bonding or mutual trust and respect between the parents and the children in these cultural representations. Whether it is in the novel Anita and Me or the television series Goodness Gracious Me (1996-2001) or The Kumars at No. 42 (2001-2006), irony and satire mark the treatment meted out to young and old, adult or child, of both communities, and the fact that emotionally sound parent-child relationships are the backdrop of most of the drama in these texts, reflects the centrality of the bond rather than “generational conflict”, which is a very narrow stereotype of BrAsians (Brah 2006). Thus to begin any discussion on this issue, it must be clarified that the parent-child bond, complete with its varieties of emotional warps and weaves, accommodates both pleasant and unpleasant strains by the BrAsian writers. Whether this is a balanced portrayal or not will be borne out by the argument of the chapter.

Thus, although there are portrayals of reasonably happy childhoods in some of the texts, they are yet marked by a hint of sorrow or hidden anxiety in many of them. The reasons for these are usually due to the change in mindsets of elders and youngsters and the inability to hold on to power that the adults often experience. The children and the adults together participate, unwittingly, in a struggle for power in the homes they have chosen to make, away from home, vis a vis the wider world outside to which they are already struggling to belong, with huge aspirations appropriate to their class origins back in India. Added to this sociocultural struggle there is the dimension of economic deprivation due to lack of employment opportunity and constant financial stress (Wilson 1978; Chandan 1986; Ballard 1994 and 2004).
Memories of domestic upheavals leading from such stressful experiences of the initial immigration period form a large part of the narrative content of the early chapters of the novels. Added to these memories are the collective memories of the family or the community that are often enacted in the child’s presence, as in *Anita and Me*.

Debates on the role of memory in relation to the creative process and in the shaping of identity suggest the importance of adolescence and early childhood as the “sensitive period for the acquisition and consolidation of the collective memory” (Dudai 2004: 52). Sociologists like Durkheim, as early as 1895, have used the term “collective unconscious” as a body of social knowledge, which the psychologist Jung, in 1969, developed to mean primordial archetypes stored in the human unconscious, which affect our actions. The “collective engram is distributed in the brains of individuals with overlapping lifespan that transmit the information from one generation to another, as well as in artifacts of culture” (Dudai 52). Paul Ricoeur (2004 cited in Lavenne) has argued, following Aristotle’s positions on memory, that memory is an individual phenomenon, as opposed to the sociologist Maurice Halbwachs (1950 cited in Lavenne) who insists on the primacy of the collective role of memory. Ricoeur also admits that collective memory is important, but he categorises yet another, a third zone, an interface between the two. According to Ricoeur, there are three planes of memory, individual, collective and an intermediate zone involving one’s close relatives or peers. In fact the term “collective memory” has been the subject of several interpretative debates, between the Ricoeur school which insists on the nature of memory as an individual phenomenon, “the tradition of inwardness” (Ricouer 2004: 96-120 cited in Lavenne) as opposed to the Halbwachs school’s insistence on the primacy of collective memory. According to Lavenne and others, for fictional narratives, the middle path is more useful to follow, which Ricoeur later took, along with Candau (1998 cited in Lavenne), that “Collective memory functions as a framework within which individual memory is built and structured” (2005: 3). Indeed the texts analysed in this thesis show how collective memories are acquired during childhood, and remain the most abiding and cherished in the individual memory of the protagonist. The novelists often encourage the reader to correlate their protagonists’ adult action or thought with recollections from their childhood, notably Meera Syal’s *Life isn’t all ha ha hee hee* and Preethi Nair’s *One Hundred Shades of White*. 

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The Black British *Bildungsroman*. “Black”, “Asian”, “South Asian”.
The novels written by immigrant women of Indian origin in Britain often fall into the category of the *Bildungsroman*. Mark Stein (1998) cites the work of Ellen Morgan (1972), Margaret Butcher (1982) and Rita Felski (1986) while tracing the growth and development of the Black British novel and links it with major trends in neofeminism. Mark Stein describes the Black British *Bildungsroman* thus:

as a phantom genre in that these fictions of character formation can be expanded to include any text that can be figured as a subject producing itself in history, which is to say any text whatsoever, while the category may concurrently be contracted to include only a handful of novels. (1998: 92)

Mark Stein traces the work of critics across the globe while discussing the recent popularity of this genre in the formation of black histories, as opposed to recording the lives of white protagonists earlier. He refers to the emergence of the notion that several feminists postulate, that the *Bildungsroman* is not only a genre adopted by black or commonwealth writers but also by female writers, under the influence of this genre, “The black British *Bildungsroman* is then about the problematics of subjecthood attained through dialectical interaction between self and society, articulated in a chronological and linear narrative structure” (1998: 92-93).

Though one may not accept all of Stein’s arguments in support of the black British novel and its position in the formation of a new black British culture, its strong leanings towards the *Bildungsroman* is a fact. The term *Bildungsroman* itself is not a little problematic when applied to the novels written by Asian and Carribean or African writers, collectively known as “Black writers”, as the genre is European in origin, and centers around the development of the life-story of a white person. However the established popularity of the novel itself, in the postcolonial context, is now unquestionable, and in fact black writers all over the world are increasingly recognized as some of the well-known exponents of the genre. For our convenience we may adopt the term BrAsian instead of Black, (see Chapter One, section 1.1) as academicians and critics of South Asian origin prefer not to conflate their identity under the term “Black”.

The *Bildungsroman* or “apprentice novel” presupposes a development in time corresponding to the growth of the central character or characters, and most of the works under this project do exhibit that kind of growth. The typical *Bildungsroman* traces the progress of a young person toward self-understanding and a sense of social
responsibility, oftten under the care of a friend, or an adult to whom the hero relates as if an “apprentice”. Usually, the protagonist is a sensitive and gifted young man who encounters numerous problems and makes several false starts before he accomplishes his goals. Critics have started to explore the female Bildungsroman, which follows the growth of a young woman toward emotional and social maturity, as a variation on the type, which focuses on the difficulties of achieving maturation and inner development while constrained by the limitations inherent in being female in a patriarchal society. In a male Bildungsroman the protagonist should finally accept a responsible role within the community, from ignorance and innocence to maturity through the successful negotiation of psychological and social conflicts which indicate his growth. Sandra Friedan (1983) notes the close relationship between Bildungsroman and a further traditional genre, that is autobiography, and says that both of these genres collude in coopting the young male into an increasingly industrialized, materialistic, and alienating bourgeois society.

Rita Felski, in Beyond Feminist Aesthetics: Feminist Literature and Social Change (1989), is interested by the repeated confessional and developmental emphasis of contemporary women’s writing since the early 1970s which reveals that notions of self and identity are important concepts for members of minority groups. She questions the applicability of terms related to the search for “identity” in these novels, and asserts that to minority and oppressed groups it is of little value as they have hardly ever enjoyed the privilege of having a self, they have always been forced to acquiesce to the dominant culture. For these groups the discovery of self-identity is politically powerful to join in collective resistance against oppressors: “the creation and affirmation of symbolic identities constitutes a recurring need on the part of marginalized social groups, fulfilling a desire for self-validation in the face of the hostility of a dominant culture” (37). The telling of personal life-stories is one way to share knowledge, to build community, and invite support. In the female Bildungsroman, the heroine is in constant danger of being imprisoned, having her development blocked, or of spiraling downward to her figurative or literal death. For female protagonists, the story may begin when the heroine is a small child but the story of her development usually begins later on in her life, “after conventional expectations of marriage and motherhood have been fulfilled and found insufficient” (Abel 7).
There are three stages, or crucial events that characterize a traditional *Bildungsroman*. Firstly, the protagonist must suffer loss and/or discontent early on in the novel, secondly, there must be constant conflicts between her needs and the norms of her society. Finally, the *Bildungsroman* ends with the protagonist having embraced society’s norms (Hader), but a female protagonist in a female *Bildungsroman* will most likely be fighting an uphill battle, the reason simply being that she is a woman. In the traditional *Bildungsroman*, the apprenticeship usually takes the form of a formal education whereas in the female *Bildungsroman* the protagonist “learn[s] instead to consolidate their female nurturing roles rather than to take a more active part in the shaping of society” (Abel 7). Exchanging one environment for another with the purpose of exploring is a trait usually found in the traditional *Bildungsroman* (Abel 7), and not always in the female *Bildungsroman*. So in the final stages of the traditional *Bildungsroman*, the spirit and values of the social order he belonged to become manifest in the protagonist, who is then accommodated into society, and the same usually happens in a female *Bildungsroman* as well. In the end, the protagonist finds love, in a male and female *Bildungsroman*, which is supposed to take her/him to a higher plane than the material milieu, but it may actually reinforce materialism by the connections s/he forms through the beloved.

Migrant writings usually involve recollection and retelling of actual experiences, thus the autobiographical mode is very often adopted by the writers, as is common with writers of the *Bildungsroman* as well. The tale may be told in the first or the third person, but the transparency of the narrative, its correspondence with real accounts or historical reconstructions suggest how the authors’ own life-experiences must have helped shape the fictional plot, characters and incidents. Though one does not look for actual correspondences to the author’s lives in autobiographical fiction, the texts do suggest them. Thus, Meera Syal’s early life in the Midlands mining town Essington enlivens the life of the people of “Tollington”, Randhawa’s life in Brixton and other suburbs among Punjabi and other BrAsian immigrants finds place in her novels, and Preethi Nair and Atima Srivastava’s novels speak to the reader about the younger generation BrAsian’s life in London.

One of the major stages depicted in this body of autobiographical fiction is the childhood of the protagonist in novels like, *Anita and Me, A Wicked Old Woman, One Hundred Shades of White*, the AWWC collections of short stories, Syal’s *Life isn’t* and *Sumitra’s Story*. Though most of the novels unfold as adult recollection of
childhood memory, the incidents selected or omitted are significant indicators of the writer’s attitude, belief and politics. Sifted through time, certain incidents stand out as being particularly significant, while certain others remain peripheral to the writer’s concern. For instance in the better part of the novel Anita and Me, Anita is the one person who Meena Kumar, a BrAsian child in the 1960s in a mining town called Tollington in the Midlands, tries to become. Therefore Anita occupies the major narrative focus, but she disappears within half a sentence at the end of the novel, when Syal writes “She never replied, of course” (AM 328), to Meena’s farewell letter, when Meena leaves Tollington for a presumably better future. Thus memory is selective in its reconstruction of events from childhood, as Halbwachs’ successors (Warnock 1987; McConkey 1996 cited in Lavenne 2005, see section 2.1) seem to suggest. They view memory as “social reconstruction, the past as shaped by the concerns of the present” (Kihlstrom 2000: 21-22). Thus Meena remembers Anita and her friends from the past in order to define who she is and how different she is from her earlier self. Meena also selects incidents, sifting them from her memory, to give her readers the flavour of the sixties mining village in Britain and its changing socio-political landscape, in the light of her present, about which she is absolutely silent. But the reader has no doubt as to her present status: Meena, like Meera Syal is certainly a successful author who can write with truth and conviction unabashedly about her own and her communities’, BrAsian and British, weaknesses and strengths. According to Conway: “In some women’s stories the powerful I of the narrator is center stage … Whenever someone tells her story straight and in an authoritative voice, we know she has developed her own sense of agency and can sustain it despite nagging cultural doubts” (1998: 88). Thus selectivity of memory functions as a marker of narrative strategy, both to reveal and to conceal certain facts about the narrator’s persona according to her judgement, empowers the narrator of a female Bildungsroman.

Another interesting treatment is that of space, by nearly all these writers, who let the novel flow easily through semi-urban Midlands, London and its suburbs, on the one hand, and Bombay, Punjab, Kerala or Delhi on the other. They seem to be taking transcontinental strides through all these spaces that belong to them, either as children having lived there, or as inheritors of family lore. Their writing incorporates what Roger Bromley, quoting Nestor Canclini calls the “multi-locational imagination” (2000: 15) of the immigrant writer. Though physically in England, the authors travel
through transnational spaces, through their parents' homelands left behind with regret and through their own poignant fascination for the unknown nation.

The third literary category the writers have experimented with is the use of narrative voice used to tell these stories. There is the detached laconic narrator with a staccato narrative in Randhawa’s writing, the engagingly witty voice of Syal’s narrators, the flat, committed tone of Rukshana Smith or Farhana Sheikh, the occasionally nostalgic rural accounts of Kerala by Preethi Nair, contrasting sharply with the sharpness of Atima Srivastava’s London BrAsians’ narrative. Undoubtedly, the detached tone reflects a certain amount of control over emotions. The novelists do not want to leave the readers with the impression of weakness, softness or sentimentality: they want their narratives to be a blend of strength and poignancy of feeling. Often, they use a polyphonic kind of narration involving many of these categories, for example Meena’s or Anita’s spoken English, which is rough and ready, richly ironic and funny, dotted with dialectal variation, contrasts with the Hindified polite language spoken by the BrAsian characters both outside, and at home (see Chapter Five and the Conclusion). Similarly, the Englishes used by Randhawa’s characters vary from the two codes of Indianised English, often with Punjabi inflections, and a London accent with the English usage typical of a young educated urban person. Through a blend of memory, treatment of time, space and unique narrative voice the tales of childhood at home and outside are woven in the first part of most of the novels taken into consideration in this chapter, but before examining that aspect, a closer look at homing desire and the notion of home in the diaspora spaces is important.

2.2 Notion Of “Home” In BrAsian Women’s Writing: Forever “In-Between”?

Among the earlier writers exploring the notion of home from the mature immigrant woman’s point of view was Leena Dhingra in Amritvela or First Light (FL1991). It is also true that Leena Dhingra sets nearly her entire novel in India where her protagonist goes to sort out the loose ends of her unfulfilled life. There is thus occasional reference to her unhappiness with her white British husband (48), the strain in her relationship with him (17) and her longing to be out of the entanglement of a troublesome life in distant, cold England, with her daughter. More interesting is Meera’s own evaluation of her own position as a subject always in search of a home,
always travelling home, suspended in the clouds during her flight to India, as if that metaphorises her special location of suspension between two cultures. She says:

If, as I have often said, I feel myself to be suspended between two cultures, then this is where I belong, the halfway mark. Here in the middle of nowhere, up in the atmosphere, is my space – the halfway point between East and West. My watch informs me and my heart agrees. (FL 1).

Vaguely looking for solutions to her undefined problems, Meera runs from pillar to post to “get information” and “look for possibilities” in the hope that “One day I will surely get there!” (33-35), but no solution can be found. In fact the metaphorical rejection of contemporary India manifests itself physically through her illness, which hastens her return to England. Amritvela portrays what Mark Stein calls a “transgression of national boundaries” as a text which records what happens in the countries of the mind of the character more than in the actual locations. This theme of search for identity is taken up in the latter sections of Evaristo’s *Lara*, when the protagonist Lara travels with her parents to Nigeria to find out about her Nigerian father’s, and her own shared origins. Lara too travels across nations and boundaries, from England to Europe and Central Asia, then Africa to South America, (96-140), and finally back to London, but in her mind she travels half the globe, across centuries, following her slave ancestors.

The adult Meera in *Amritvela* links us back to the little girl who plays so much of Monopoly that her mind is full of the turns in the Monopoly board. She translates this further into real life and the symbolic immunity she believes she enjoys because she is at Piccadilly is only because of the rules of the game, which she as a child had held sacrosanct, and so English, that she thought she would probably always be immune and safe in the surroundings of Piccadilly. Her dense self realizes in the end that that is never to be, the migrant, especially the postcolonial migrant, is caught in the process of forever looking for a good place to stay, and rules which stand for the ‘fairness’ of the coloniser’s ‘mission’ will forever elude her, and her childhood innocence and adult naivete are repeatedly shattered when this myth explodes. It took her back to an awareness that no one is truly free in the crosscurrents of history, each nation has a past which makes its denizens feel choked and circumscribed. Meera’s assertion of self is primarily important, in such an early text, because it records the protagonist’s courage to come out from the confines of her stultifying existence despite problems. The author, Leena Dhingra is able to focus on the idea of a “home”
and “selfhood” to be found away from home, so much so that she takes space and
time out of their confines, and finds a true home, her own space midway in the clouds,
suspended between the two countries.

The novel ends inconclusively, on a new beginning, an introspection that starts
on the plane, about life with an absent English husband, a mixed-race daughter,
relationships cast aside by the young BrAsian woman, for the search for the meaning
of identity. She finally says as she is flying ‘home’, “I am on my way home. From my
home in the East, to my home in the West, safely through my space – my home in the
clouds. Yes, I have come – and am going – home. For now I can sleep, safely on the
plane. For a plane is always safe: whichever way I am going, it always carries me
home” (FL 191-192). Meera’s childlike search for her home links her to the several
children in this novel whose articulation of this homing desire is not so strong, nor
nostalgic; she is like the precursor of the second-generation British-born children who
are restless without knowing why, without having a strong transnational linkage that
can take them back to their imaginary “home” to India and bring them forward to
their real home in Britain. “Home is thus a spatial imaginary: a set of intersecting and
variable ideas and feelings, which are related to context, and which construct places,
extend across spaces and scales, and connects places” (Blunt and Dowling 2006). The
notion of home, though limited to the spatial connotation for the child, often includes
memories of the transnational home left behind, conjured up by the parent or other
elders, thus it extends beyond specific limits to other spaces in the mind.

Home As A Special Place/ Basis For Identity.

The home is the central reference point in the child’s mind, anywhere, and in a
typical South Asian context the home occupies a reverential, sacred position. As
Rosemary George says, “The word ‘home’ immediately connotes the private sphere
of patriarchal hierarchy, gendered self-identity, shelter, comfort, nurture and
protection” (1996: 1). The inviolability of the typical English home is superadded to
this idea of extreme inaccessibility of the BrAsian home to the outsider, especially the
British. It is a space occupied by women, primarily, and shared intimately by siblings
and the mother: the absence of male figures noticeable in most of the texts. It is a
place where one strives to be oneself, eating with fingers, worshipping, singing hymns
or other songs as Meena’s parents (AM) did. To the children in these texts the home is
usually some place one returns to be another person, with a different set of
behavioural rules, where normally, a white person would not be allowed, (*AM, AWOW, SS*). In exceptional cases if that did happen, the children would be like bridges between two cultures, trying to provide access to customs, which are unacceptable to the dominant society (Brah 1996: 29). But the texts candidly show how customs and practices may even be deliberately mystified or glorified, to save face in front of the outsider. Meena tells Anita that people always eat with fingers at the posh restaurants, knowing that Anita hardly had access to them, when she invites her home where they do not use knives and forks to eat chapattis. As if not wanting to be outdone, Meena’s father explains to Anita that to burp is a sign of satisfaction with the host’s cooking, and not an embarrassment to polite society, and the white girl lets out a “window-shattering belch” (*AM 255*) even after her fish and chips, to conform to the host’s expectations.

**Home As A Contested Site: “Home” In India, England, Africa.**

“Home is a way of establishing difference”, says Rosemary George (1996: 2), and this is very appropriate to the context of the BrAsian home. Among the BrAsians, home is also the place to use all the things disliked by those outside, like spices, oil and incense sticks, which nearly all the mothers described in the texts are particularly fond of using liberally. This happens at the cost of some embarrassment to their children who turn up in school smelling of all these put together, as the texts tell us (*OHSW*). In fact Sumitra Patel, the young girl whose family evicted from Uganda in *Sumitra’s Story* wishes to keep her two worlds separate. She does not invite the white British girls she befriends in school though she visits them occasionally. She, like Qaiser in “Cassandra and the Viaduct” perhaps fears rejection and the violation of her private space by the majority community which is often abusive and hateful on the street or at school, though her friends are kind and helpful. Kulwant (*AWOW*) freely brings her friend Caroline, as do Atima Srivastava’s heroines Angie (*Transmission*) and Mira (*Looking For Maya*), from a later chronological time, from a different sociocultural background of more affluent sections of the BrAsian community. Rosemary George also says, “Home, I will argue, along with gender/sexuality, race and class, acts as an ideological determinant of the subject” (ibid). That may be acceptable up to a point, as these texts show how, in the process of attaining subjecthood, the protagonists develop an openness of mind as opposed to traditional, transnational ideology, a tolerance, a skill of balancing both worlds which is anathema to any ideological principle based on exclusivity of cultures. The project aims to show
how the BrAsian youngster, here, the focus is on the girl-child, has immense resources to transcend the limitations of the two cultures she has inherited, British and Asian, and adopt a suitably BrAsian cultural ethos that, as the texts will show over the subsequent chapters as well, is syncretic, a hybrid culture, richer because of the blend of both.

According to Roger Ballard (1994), keeping the two worlds separate has unique advantages for the second generation BrAsian, as it helps her to become a skilled social navigator. This is not to say that the second generation BrAsian does not respect or value her home. It is because she does not want to have any of the cultural practices at home frowned upon, nor does she wish to be alienated from the mainstream, that she wishes to keep the two worlds separate. In fact, each of the texts chosen here offer new ways of looking at the relationships of the children with their homes and the value they attach to them. Most of the novels have devoted a lot of space and time to the depiction of the time spent by the protagonist as a child at home.

It seems as though the novel needs the foundation of the childhood home to stand upon, as in a typical Bildungsroman, and the later growth and maturity of the characters are crucially linked to whatever they choose to recall and record of their childhood home. It may be a large bungalow or a single bedsit, a semi-detached suburban home or a small, crammed house, but every corner of the house, the special spaces, remains embedded in the memory of the narrator. The protagonist often selects garden or shed, backyard or kitchen to mark signposts of consciousness, where they enacted their roles according to the gendered geographies of spatial construction.

In Anita and Me, Meena loves her own room, the shed she shares with Anita to read Jackie magazines, the farty sofa in their hall, her mother’s organised kitchen, the open fields in front and the yard alongside the close-knit houses of their working-class white neighbours. However, Syal describes the first generation’s life-style immediately after migration, recollected by the incredibly fecund collective memory of the precocious girl narrator Meena:

And then there’s the early years of struggle and disillusion, living in a shabby boarding house room with another newly arrived immigrant family, Polish, I think would be quite romantic; my father arriving back from his sweatshop at dawn to take his place in the bed being vacated by Havel who would be off to do his shift on the McDouglas Biscuits assembly line, my father sweeping away crushed garibaldi crumbs from the communal pillow before sliding gratefully into oblivious sleep, my mother awake at his side, counting the kicks from
the daughter inside her who would condemn her, marry her to England forever. (9)

Theoretically, “retrieval of collective memory involves reconstruction (Halbwachs 1925), in which the representation of the original event is adapted to the context of recollection (e.g. Schwartz et al 1986)” (Dudai 2004: 52). In this incident collective memory and imagination together help the younger generation to relive the moment of arrival and its attendant horrors, which Roger bromely refers to as anamnesis (2000: 123). The alienation from an earlier “high” culture to menial work in the new land is noted from other details in the novel about the upper class affiliations of the Kumars in Delhi, as if “oblivious sleep” was the only way out of the mess of unacceptables which are “shabby”, mechanized work in the “assembly line” as opposed to the green wheat fields of Punjab or the college where Mr. Kumar studied and worked, the “communal pillow” ravaging the privacy of the young couple about to give birth to an ungrateful daughter. The “condemnation” is both cause and effect of migration: Meena condemns her mother as she has been brought to a place full of people whom she is taught to hate as opposed to their beloved country which they have opted to leave behind, and also because her mother is not ready to assimilate into her adopted country’s culture. She is ready to believe that “the gap between what is said and what is thought, … is a place in which I have always found myself” (AM 10). As she concludes, she needs to turn to mythologies like the one she created for the reader above, to belong, as she has been deprived of history.

In Preethi Nair’s One Hundred Shades of White (OHSW), Maya Kathi and her brother Satchin, and their mother Nlini are brought to England from Bombay, and then abandoned by their father Raul, who goes to the US to live with his American wife and children. The theme of abandonment and the act of suppressing from the children the truth about their father’s “death” by the mother is reminiscent of the novel Haven’t Stopped Dancing Yet by Shyama Perera. There are a number of references to several homes the Kathis try to make, in India and in England. Maya’s first English home is a “new, five-bedroomed house in South London” (OHSW 19). With fine carpets and glistening silver taps, television and a park nearby, good schools with white friends, Maya’s first home is remembered vividly by her. The author slowly establishes the sense of opulence and ostentatious living, with expensive gifts being showered on Maya till her father disappears.
Her next home is a damp “semi-furnished flat in Green Street in the East End of London” (31). The toilet had to be shared, the tap dripped, there was dampness and grease, but a lot of warmth came from Maggie, their Irish landlady and family friend, later. Maya’s memory details episodes describing each of their subsequent homes, where they get more space and their own beds, warmth and cleanliness. Maya is also able to show how race, class and gender intersect to destabilise her childhood, and how the gendered space of home, built around her mother and Maggie, and her loving brother, teach her to value relationships rather than material things. Abandoned by her treacherous father, Maya is caught in the web of gendered geographies of power: transplanted from Bombay to London, from South London to the East End, declassed until her mother works to achieve some agency, cognitively and physically, to change their lives for the better.

Despite initial welcome by the British government, Sumitra’s family (SS) has to move from house to house, like other Ugandan Asians, as they get periodically “upgraded” accommodation from the Council, which is actually another way of dispersing Asians from areas where there is a concentration of immigrant population to areas further away (Brah 2006: 47). Even Sumitra, like her friend Talika back in Uganda, is deeply embedded in the gendered space of kitchen and hall, serving food to the men or helping her mother. The girls belong to families originating from rural or orthodox Indian communities in Gujarat (Gidoomal 1997; Brah 2006), whose emigrated status has had little impact on their perception of traditional gender roles. Thus, as the child Sumitra who had left Uganda grows older, the young girl Sumitra is expected to acquiesce to these more domesticated spaces with chores thrust upon her. Women’s labour, in the BrAsian context, starts early, and is taken as a mark of obedience, good upbringing, and being dutiful, while men are conditioned, as the girls observe, get to eat what they want, eat first, and not even wash up afterwards. Her home is also very gradually upgraded in terms of consumer goods and gadgets, and her mother wants a final address so that she may buy the white curtains and carpets of the right size for the rooms. As a child, Sumitra’s gendered geography is severely undercut by her own aspirations, parental expectations, consumerist desires, and role models from the mainstream and the media. Though, on a cognitive level, she is looking towards the outside world to fulfil her potential, she is hardly able to exert any effort towards fulfilling such a dream in the existing circumstances. The story of Sumitra is told by a non-Asian immigrant, as discussed in Chapter One, who shares
stories about her BrAsian friends for teenage readers, so there is the emphasis on desire for personal freedom which is an essential part of Western teenage life. The metaphor of a bridge is used (SS 36), to describe Sumitra’s position as chief negotiator in British society, and this geographical metaphor stands out in her map of life after Uganda.

It is clearly established in the early stages of each of the novels, that to a BrAsian child in Britain, like others elsewhere, home is that space intimately linked with that time which memory records as the most precious. It implies a level of intimacy, belonging and comfort that a citizen of any country in the world needs to feel, and usually cancel out the fears of rejection and discrimination of the world outside. In the early childhood, it is a space for wholeness, freedom and untrammeled exercise of one’s identity. But, home becomes a site of conflict at a slightly later stage, when socialisation begins, when school or college-going children realise the inadequacy of their notion of “home” interpellated with their family’s or community’s expectations. Thus, a BrAsian child often finds that her idea of home conflicts with the individual memories of her parents, and the collective memory of her extended family or community.

**Asian Homes /British Society: Twin Influences On BrAsian Children.**

Sometimes the idea of “home” cherished in family lore or tradition intrudes upon the child’s consciousness of what is home. The child’s differences with parents may translate into an assertively oppositional identity, or result into withdrawal from parents. For example, Kulwant (AWOW) spends her childhood in the 1970s in a conservative British Punjabi home but she emulates her white British friend Caroline and her relationship with her family. Conditioned by her upbringing, Kuli dresses in a certain way, behaves quietly and seriously, helps her mother and does her duty at home, and tries her best not to hurt her mother. But outside the house she wishes to be someone else. Pictures of many other Indian homes flit across the novel, and in most of them the older women are found speaking only Punjabi and preparing *samosas* or looking after the house and the younger ones are expected to lend a hand. Randhawa shows how the newer generation, educated and independent in thought, quietly asserts itself to get away from the routine drudgery of the home, which the older generation looks upon as the woman’s sole occupation. Thus there are negotiations of power within the domestic space between the younger girls and stronger and older women,
as well as among these groups of women in the community on occasion.

Kulwant also rebels against her traditional identity in school and among her friends. She first rebels against traditional “Indian” norms of behaviour through her “relationship with her white boyfriend Michael and then rejects assimilation when she realizes that she will always remain the ‘other’, within a white cultural milieu” (Pandurang 2001: 21). The kind of space defined as an “Indian home” in the novel is a site of oppositional attitudes emerging, a site of contesting aspirations and ambitions. Kuli therefore, repeatedly leaves home, even in her later years, as if making a permanent home is impossible for her, and moving from place to place is the trope denoting the essence of her migratory status. Kulwant gives one of the finest expressions of homelessness when she talks about how her childhood has been spent, like all second generation Indian children, with adults weaving a fantasy about India to her. She elaborates,

India for some was home, for others nothing more than a distant childhood memory, and for those born here a patchwork land transmitted through parents’ stories of places, people, happenings: an infrastructure kept alive with baby milk, mixed with rotis and savoured with the mature taste of chillies. Throwing up some who strived to be more Indian than the Indians over there, though born in England as they were. (AWOW: 31)

Here Kulwant talks about how the nation always follows the mindscape of the transnational subject, the ideoscape and the mediascape (Appadurai 1990) working in tandem with the stories out of collective memory: mediascapes refer to the influence of the popular media, and ideoscapes concatenations of images which together impact upon the individual along with her memory, to create an idea of the homeland never seen. She finds herself just as much circumscribed by her Indian background as she is by her BrAsianness. Thus in the 1960s and 70s, even in such a young BrAsian girl, power lines become circles of relationships, emotions and behaviour appropriate to each spatial domain. Kulwant, according to C.L. Innes, wishes to make a home and find “psychological being and identity in England” (1995: 33).

Meena (AM) is caught up by her attachment to her own home in Tollington of the 1960s as opposed to her parents’ and grandmother’s idea of India as the only possible home for them all. There are constant reminders of the wholesomeness of rotis as opposed to fish and chips, and the most embarrassing demonstration of culinary loyalties stares Meena in the face in the front garden itself. While others have
ornate, crammed gardens with artefacts and plants jostling for attention, Meena’s mother only grows dhania and mint and lemon verbena in their “boring rectangle of lumpy grass” (AM 15). Meena’s objection lies in the exterior demonstration of these heightened patriotic feelings, as she desperately wants to belong to the country she is born in, and be like all the other white children she knows. In fact Meena wondered whether

every time they came home, shutting their doors, they were immediately transported to another planet, where non-related elders were called Aunties and Uncles and talked in rapid Punjabi, which their children understood but answered back in broad Black Country slang, where we ate food with our fingers and discussed family feuds happening thousands of miles away, where manners were so courtly that a raised eyebrow could imply an insult, where sensibilities were so finely tuned that an advert featuring a woman in a bikini could clear a room. (165)

As Roger Bromley describes in his excellent analysis of the novel, Meena needs to mimic Anita and her white friends in order to belong to a place which she calls her home, as opposed to the extended transnational “home” of her parents’ generation. “Initially distanced from her parents and their extended family, Meena longs to identify with the local, white working-class community embodied in the figure of the precocious role model, Anita” (2000: 143).

Satchin and Maya (OHSW) try to adapt to the variety of homes they find themselves in due to the peculiar circumstances of their lives, (see Section 2.2). It is interesting to see how they, on the one hand, and their mother on the other, try to make new homes with completely different cultural and social aspirations. Their mother Nalini tries to block the memory of their father by taking away every reminder of his, and struggles to retain her Indian roots by cooking traditional food, which the children reject. They wish to assimilate quickly, eat English food, and be like the white children around them. They resent her oiling their hair (35), packing oily or spicy lunch, preferring a cheese sandwich for fear of name calling (37), they preferred burgers and fish fingers (82) instead of dosas and idlis or other spice-laden savouries their mother cooked, and they devised new ways of evading her cooking till she gradually relented. Through culinary reminders Nalini wants to keep the idea of India alive in the children’s minds, as is often done in diasporic homes, but they reject her efforts repeatedly, as they carry their own version of the homeland through imagination and memories of their grandmother and the seashore or green fields, not something as
materialistic as food. Yet they try to remain happy and united in face of all odds, due to Nalini’s efforts to retain the semblance of an Indian home in England, a place of wholeness and purity. This reflects that desire for an immigrant to create “a third space” that theorists of postcolonial and immigrant writing name to describe the postcolonial migrant subject’s effort to create his or her own space and own identity in the host country. Nalini creates a synthesis of the two known spaces into a new unknown, private one that she must create in order to remain sane after her abandonment. Their childhood homes reflect the makeshift, temporary, uncertain quality of the Kathi children’s family life. Their movement suggests aptly what Rosemary George (1996) describes at the end of her thesis on the politics of home: the detachment of the immigrant from the idea of home, the understanding that home is often only an aura, a presence which is actually, always absent, because there is no real home at all. She says:

Home in the immigrant genre is a fiction that one can move beyond or recreate at will. The association between an adequate self and a place to call home is held up to scrutiny and then let go. As postmodern and postcolonial subjects, we surprise ourselves with our detachment to the things we were taught to be attached to. (200)

The story of Sumitra (SS) begins back in Uganda in the 1970s where her father had a grocery shop and where they enjoyed reasonable comfort, security and prestige. Mala Pandurang (2001) writes:

The Asian community began to arrive in England as a consequence of Africanisation policies in Kenya and Tanzania and this exodus culminated with the influx of Asian expellees from Uganda in 1972. (Unlike the immigrants from the Indian subcontinent, East African Asians are also known as the “twice-migrants” in the context of their double geographic displacement). (24)

Though the refugees were rehabilitated soon, the British public resented their presence in exclusively white areas, as discussed before, and this in addition to the already present South Asian emigrants, raised the levels of insecurity among native Britons. Pandurang relates these fears to the novelists’ descriptions: “The increased waves of brown migrants led to anxiety, concern and fear among the white British populace. The novelists describe how the discourse of racism changes with the shifts in British economy and polity” (ibid). The Ugandan Asians are not comfortable with the language, their own unwanted status as refugees with nothing on their backs, and
with the hatred and suspicion of most of the white people they encounter. To start
with, they live in a guesthouse where they are not allowed to cook, (a basic problem
with pure vegetarians), to worship or to watch television programmes without
incurring the wrath of some of their disgruntled fellow lodgers. To have a proper
home they have to wait a long time and yet with some helpful white friends they are
able to start a new life. Yet, they nostalgically remember how good it was in Uganda,
and maintain social contact with their Ugandan-Asian friends, and this kind of self-
help and networking helps them survive the years of initial crisis (Gidoomal 1997;
Brah: 2006).

Thus Sumitra’s life in Britain is a reflection of the multiple axes of migration,
politics, social and economic discrimination in public spaces, and gender bias at
home. Sumitra, as opposed to Kulwant in Ravinder Randhawa’s A Wicked Old
Woman, leaves home after making all efforts to keep the family in comfort and seeing
them through the difficult years. What Randhawa engages with in the major part of
her novel is the increasingly troublesome middle age of the Asian immigrant, who
finds that she has spent too much time in making others happy and too little for
introspection or self-gratification. Rukshana Smith ponders on the impact of self-
sacrifice and longing for self-hood in a much younger heroine, from a largely similar
background. Both heroines, the young Kulwant and Sumitra, are girls are in a power
relation of inequality in their families and among schoolfellows, as we see in chapter
three of this thesis. They are both, however, able to assert their individuality, and
come out with ways of renegotiating their identities through the geographies of
adversity. In Sumitra’s house, as in Kulwant’s, the free and frequent presence of white
friends is definitely something different from other Indian homes, and their influence
definitely works on the minds of the BrAsian girls (See 2.2 for a detailed discussion).

Sumitra’s Story is prescribed as a text in many schools in China, Singapore. It was as
a part of the multicultural syllabus in England in the GCSE Forms 4 to 6 in 1992 for
young students. These two novels therefore present the so-called “liberating” aspect
of western society, though in a tongue-in-cheek manner, on the two young Asian
women who, after attempting to assimilate and integrate, learn to aspire for
themselves, to leave the security of home and family, to be prepared to demonstrate
courage and face hardship to do so.
In Shyama Perera’s *Haven't Stopped Dancing Yet*, a novel of betrayal and friendship, Mala Fonseka and her mother arrived in London in 1962, from Sri Lanka, in search of her father and home. This writer of Sri Lankan origin shows how a young immigrant girl survives poverty due to abandonment by her father, with support from her mother and friends. When Mala arrives in London, her father actually takes them to a twelve by eight room in a “peeling four-storey home he’d rented in Craven Hill Gardens” and leaves them in “A country for which my mum’s colonial education had not equipped her: ‘I learned Wordsworth, Mala, not domestic science.’ A country where we knew nobody and became nobodies” (4). In keeping with this sense of instability, there are also some portrayals of homes that are *not* secure places for self-development. In these cases, as discussed in the following section, the idea of impermanence, hints of instability and frequent disruptions of an idyllic family life are potent factors in undermining the sanctity of the idea of the very home which is upheld as the fount of security and wholeness.

**Home In the AWWC Short Stories—Insecure, Unstable, Impermanent.**

The short stories of the AWWC portray the childhood of BrAsian children in a variety of contexts. The theme of domestic unrest and insecurity recurs in some of them. This is not always necessarily because of the attendant troubles involving post-emigrational rehabilitation. They often stem from the very instability of contemporary family life, which the authors show, is as fragile and complicated in a BrAsian family, which is supposed to be stereotypically secure and proof against disintegration (Wilson 1978; Ballard 1994) as any other. The stories suggest that material well-being, an aspiration, a goal for the immigrant from the Third world, is not always conducive to emotional security or domestic happiness. This further challenges the idea of the male *Bildungsroman* and its collusion with materialism, and how incongruous such an interpretation would seem to a female version, although here it is the still further condensed form of the short story. The authors actually carefully avoid “the binarism that essentializes and privileges the West/first-world as the singular site for women’s emancipation” (Pessar and Mahler 2001: 15-16). There is no “blanket narrative of liberation” (15) in these stories to suggest that BrAsian women and children are at a socio-economic, therefore emotional, privilege over their South Asian counterparts.

In the first AWWC collection there is a story with a frightening reality of an abandoned, now neurotic mother who could not cope with the cultural shock of
immigration, whose children are kept away from her, moved from Britain to America for the sake of the father’s pride and fear (“The Nightmare”, Right of Way 1988). The story corroborates with chilling accuracy the life-experiences of many BrAsian women, as Amrit Wilson’s (1978; 2006) accounts show. In the second AWWC collection, Flaming Spirit (1994), there are stories about sisters separated from each other in two different countries (“Sisters”, “Rebecca and the Neighbours”), a motherless girl-child sexually abused by the father (“Mano Shanthi”), a father betraying his daughter by having a sexual relationship with her best friend (“Cassandra and the Viaduct”). Each of these stories is told very powerfully, dealing with the intersection of race, class, gender, caste or community, and there are lengthy discussions on them in this and the subsequent chapters. These stories record many gruesome, realistic situations, which had remained unrecorded and unheard because the girls or women experiencing them could not reveal the truth about their seemingly “comfortable” lives in the adopted country of their parents’ choice. The writers strive to bring forth the need to revisit the notion that hardworking and united BrAsian families must be living in inviolable homes, and must necessarily be rooted to their culture (Ballard 1994). BrAsian girl children are exposed to unequal positions of power even in their supposedly secure families. Thus, for the young girls portrayed in these stories, the family becomes a site both for creation and disruption of wholeness of being due to gendered geographies of power defined by class, caste or community. Their experiences of culture shock and later, their seeking agency out of it are the stuff of the female Bildungsroman, here transposed on to the short story. In BrAsian fiction, there is a clear positioning of the efforts of the children in assimilating into the host society, to move beyond any privileging of their “otherness” as children of immigrants, and asserting their selfhood as unique inheritors of a new social order. What they experience at home is surely a firm basis for the formation of their present identity and their future social position, but their interaction with parents, relatives and friends, schoolmates and teachers as well as other adults around them also impact upon their minds in numerous ways, as subsequent discussion shows.

2.2 Parents – Figures Of Ridicule/ Comic Exaggeration?
Parents play a major role in the BrAsian children’s life, functioning as extensions of their homes, as depicted in these novels and short stories. The overall portraiture of filial relationships varies, though there are certain common touches.
There is an immense love and sympathetic understanding of the parents’ struggle for identity and a better standard of life. It must be acknowledged that in most contemporary adult discourse in the West, references to parents are not strictly reverential, unlike in most non-Western writing. In the male Bildungsroman, the site of parental authority is most often also an area of contestation, as found in the German Bildungsroman Goethe’s Wilhelm Meister (1795), late-nineteenth century Russian novels like Turgenev’s Father’s and Sons (1862) and many of the late-Victorian English novels like D.H. Lawrence’s Sons and Lovers, (1913) as well. In the BrAsian novels, the tendency to rebuke or ridicule stems from the need to rectify narrow-minded attitude or behaviour that the novelists observe in the older generation, which seems incongruous when they have decided to stay in the host country. Immigrant parents may also be seen as uninformed about careers and labour markets; peers or “oneself” are perceived as more effective guides for first and second-generation immigrant youth than parents (Bootcheck and Garner 2002). There is an amused tolerance with which the child receives this incongruity. Werbner (2004) says that the “intentional hybridities of the new wave South Asian novelists and filmmakers are clearly driven” to “resist and shock” their “authoritarian migrant older generation and to induct it into the new realities of diasporic life” (903). Werbner’s thesis seems to highlight only this kind of rigid, uncompromising, inflexible, and somewhat intellectually stagnant portraiture of the parent generation, and ignores the softer, more sympathetic touches of their portrayals in the BrAsian women’s fiction. The apparent tonal facetiousness or comicality involved in this portraiture seems to be in order to accentuate the demand of the younger generation for their parents “to become more anglicized, liberal and individualistic” (ibid), but it is not the only relationship, nor are such ironic barbs directed only at the parents.

In both of Meera Syal’s novels there seems to be a certain amount of admiration for the parents undercut by a critical attitude to them, as they are often shown as sources of embarrassment to the daughters. Meena’s (AM) relationship with her parents, specially her mother and how it is often a cause for worry for her, are discussed elsewhere in this chapter, but a more obvious example is found in Syal’s other novel. Since childhood, Tania, Chila and Sunita in Life Isn’t ...(LI ) in their thirties during narrative time, are all embarrassed by their families and their loudness, perpetual late entries, oily and spicy food, matchmaking instincts and forced conviviality. The three of them often shared their thoughts and learnt to create their
own space as Punjabi *kurris* (young girls, in Punjabi) in London, by and by. Later, the three of them resist many of their parents’ machinations to get them settled in life, as and when such threats emerge, using shrewd survival strategies that help them retain their individuality. However, in times of crisis, they turn to their parents with confidence, as Chila does, and support them in sickness as happens with Tania taking care of her terminally ill father. The two areas of their lives the three girls always cherish are a) their parents’ abiding love and concern for them, and b) the support they provide in any crisis. Shared childhood memories of their parents and the community they represent, help them shape their attitudes boldly and daringly, confident of each others’ support despite occasional lapses.

Meena (*AM*) is terribly embarrassed on the Sunday get-togethers of their strictly Punjabi friends, which reiterates their otherness to their normally friendly neighbours and alienates her. However, Meena really admires her father’s singing and her mother’s cooking at these get-togethers, and delights in their happiness with friends they love like family. Meena explains to Mrs. Worall about her “pretend” cousins and aunts, and about differences in nomenclature for real cousins with specific kinship ties and these others. In a way she tries to rationalize the need for such conviviality of her parents in their otherwise aloof life in Tollington. Though she herself often laughs at her parents and “relatives”, she would always like to protect them from the strange looks thrown at them from their white British neighbours.

**Father-Daughter Relationship.**

Meena’s example brings to mind the fact that father and child relationships in the novels are in fact fraught with inconsistencies and unevenness. There are very few male presences in these texts: there is an overwhelming presence of women in the domestic spaces in the childhood of the children, and fathers or brothers are rarely portrayed from close quarters. This speaks for the gendered geographies of the young girl-children. Meena hero-worships Mr. Kumar, her father, who perhaps works as an attendant or clerk at a swimming pool, and whom she imagines to be working at a reasonably posh office. On the other hand, she is very impatient with her father’s dislike of Anita, his standoffish attitude with their white neighbours, and the way he wants to be waited hand and foot by his wife. Even then, the portrayal of Mr.Kumar in the novel is one of the kindest of fathers who really tries to understand what his daughter might want, as is expected of his class and educational background. Some of
the children in the other novels, however, are afraid of the domineering nature of their fathers, like Sumitra (SS). Her father is a very irritable man at home, probably because he has to lead a lowly existence outside: he “was being assertive, even bossy”, “scolding and complaining”, so that they “would conform to his society” (70). Rukshana Smith presents Sumitra’s recollection of happier times back in Uganda when her father was a different kind of a person, and the two contrasting pictures help correlate the change in Mr. Patel after immigration. Kuli (AWOW) is really fond of her father, who also cherishes dreams about her growing up into someone smart, and encourages her to grow up educated like her brother. But his strictness distances the children from him, and they become closer to their mother as they grow older. Maya and Satchin (OHSW) are so taken by their father Raul’s charm that they would be shocked into disbelief to learn about his abandonment of them. Their mother, who maintains that he died a hero trying to save a child in an accident, has to pay him all her life’s savings when he returns later and blackmails her, to be left at peace with her children and second husband. Tania (LI) has a terribly poor image of her father as a liar, a domineering, unsuccessful parent, but she has been very close to him in her childhood, when she “used to sit on his lap, counting the white hairs on his stubble” (317). She fondly and hopefully tends to him when he is critically ill (315-8), as if drawn by the fonder recollections she has of him and her dead mother. From her childhood, Mira (LFM) has called her parents “Ravi-Kavi’ in fun, as she can only laugh at their indistinguishable, idyllic togetherness, so outdated in the modern world of urban London. The portrayal of the father in these novels, then, far from being that of an ideal figure, is in some cases, charged with inadequacies, deceit and relinquished responsibility, the authority of whose position is implicitly challenged by the narrative intrusions and the muted voices of protest from the female protagonists, as a female Bildungsroman demands. The protective Asian father figure stereotype is turned upside down, and the father is usually found to be the person instrumental in uprooting the family from a secure home, a safer, happier place where love and loyalty mattered much more than money and future prospects.

The short stories depict this relationship in even more challenging terms, dealing with incest, rape, betrayal of the daughter by the father. In one of the short stories in the AWWC collections named “Mano Shanthi”, the highly successful father, an aspiring local council leader Sumanth Kumar rapes his adolescent daughter Neelam the day her mother dies. Neelam gets pregnant and is sent for help at a
counseling organization for Asian women by her white teacher who predictably thinks “her problems must be cultural or something” (FS 134). The white British GP who agrees to do the abortion for the thirteen year old says, “I must confess I did not get the impression that such things happened in Asian families” (135), commensurate with available stereotypes. In “Cassandra and the Viaduct”, the father Hussain has an illicit relationship with his teenage daughter Qaiser’s white best friend Marilyn, shattering the young girl’s faith in both friendship and fatherhood as two of the most dependable human bonds. The first generation immigrant father, the one who holds many dreams of the entire family in his hands, is shown as much a victim of weakness and moral lapse as perpetrator of torture and pain. His earlier sacrifice, struggle and stoical bearing of humiliation or his present success as provider, do not count at all in the face of such betrayal or abdication of responsibility. The writers of the new BrAsian fiction are not afraid of proving the Asian stereotype of the good father and the postcolonial myth of happiness in the imperial paradise, both wrong by representing in their fiction this particular aspect of misdirected paternal duty and its effect on immigrant children. In these cases the children are shown as victims of patriarchal adventurism, both of the colonial forefathers who made this intercontinental social contact and migration possible, and their birth fathers who, nourishing dreams of better lifestyle in the sahib’s land, made this possibility largely a burdensome reality. It is ultimately their cruel indifference or moral transgression that leads to deep-rooted emotional trauma in their daughters’ lives.

Mother-Daughter Relationship.

Contrastingly, the enduring relationship between mother and daughter is one that is highlighted in every BrAsian novel. By playing with the time span of the novels across generations, the authors show how this relationship is perhaps the strongest and most enduring. Sometimes there are two generations of mothers and daughters in a novel, and they share unique relationships. Though Meera Sahgal (her maiden name) in First Light (1991) has left her daughter Maya in England, she frequently remembers her and wants to bring her to India where she is with her great-aunt (surrogate mother) Bibiji. Meera sorts out the loose ends of her life in India, though she has an India of the past in her mind, which conflicts severely with the India of the present, and colonial India of a yet earlier era. Through this crossing of time limits, the author traverses her relationship with her parents, her Bibiji and aunts

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till she finds that the true home always eludes her, like true happiness. Like a child herself, this older heroine of one of the earlier novels in this selected sample, learns to sort out her problems only after going away to the comfort of the motherland, and surrogate mothers who have the time, the energy and the ability to heal her, restore her belief in her strength as a woman.

Unlike Meera, the brave trio consisting of Meena, her mother and Nanima (AM) together sort out several little issues in the young Meena’s life at a crucial stage in the increasingly hostile Tollington of the late sixties, not by going back to India. One of the finest passages illustrating this curious amalgamation of three generations of mothers and daughters occurs when Meena reminisces how happy and relieved her mother had been when Nanima arrived from India to lend her a helping hand:

Indeed I had never seen mama so fresh and girlish, as if some invisible yoke had been lifted from her shoulders and she regained the lithe legs and strong back she must have had when she cycled to and from college, humming the tunes my father sang to her through her shuttered bedroom window. I vowed then that I would never leave her, this wrenching of daughter from mother would never happen again. (202)

The text throws the young heroine proleptically into her own presumed youth, about which she fantasizes a lot, by which time the sage, mature Meena would only do the right things and never inflict grief on her mother. However, the unnamed protagonist and her sister’s child in The Glassblower’s Breath, and Niharika (ASC) and her niece, share a warm, emotional bond. In Preethi Nair’s novel, Maya Kathi and her mother Nalini owe a lot to Maya’s maternal grandmother (OHSW) who is present more in their memories rather than in the available fictional space and time.

Some of the novels daringly construct and explore new variants of mother and daughter relationships. For example, in Sunetra Gupta’s novels girl children who make brief appearances are always unnamed, carelessly called “the child” most of the time, as if a by-product of unfruitful, thwarted love, to be taken away from the fictional attention rather than maintained or developed. The curious absence of emphasis on childhood, spent as a BrAsian is perhaps because of her late settlement in Oxford, but though there are children who are part of the entire length of the narrative, they are lonely, friendless, entertained only by adults, and abandoned or exposed to harsh situations in every novel. The aunt or another female relative usually takes care of the child, and there is a threat of separation as discussed in later chapters. However, the unnamed protagonist and her sister’s child in The Glassblower’s
Breath, and Niharika (ASC) and her niece, share a warm, emotional bond.

The comparison afforded in the narrative of The Red Box between Nasreen and her mother, Tahira and hers along with Raisa’s own mother and herself poignantly reiterates the essential sameness in first generation Muslim women’s lives in 1970s and 80s Britain, regardless of their class and background. Similarly, bonding between the mothers and the girl children in Life isn’t... unfolds the nurturing roles mothers played in British Punjabi families of a fairly similar background in 1970’s and 80’s London. The novelists do not, as a rule, position mother and daughter in antagonistic roles, discarding the popular Western socio-psychological notion of rivalry embedded in this bond, but in some cases, mothers are often supplanted by other nurturers like grandmothers, aunts, or siblings if they are unable to take care of the children for long absence at work, or temporary illness. The mother-daughter relationship portrayed across the texts, attest to the fact of BrAsian women’s bonding across generations which has also seen the rise of so many women’s organisations working for the development and socio-economic rehabilitation and legal retribution for BrAsian women, young or old, across class, religion and community as seen in some of the texts, (AWOW, LI) and Gurinder Chadha’s film Bhaji on the Beach (1992).

Relationships With Siblings.

Siblings are given due space and delineated with appropriately affectionate and kindly touches. The presence of the sibling, either in the memory of the protagonist or occupying fictional focus, creates a broader base for the insight into childhood provided in these novels. It is often the sibling, who brings comfort and succour to the disturbed brother or sister in distress, who brings about a more balanced equation in filial relationships, or opens out characteristics dormant in the protagonist who is quite like, but not the same as the other. Satchin (OHSW) is more reticent than the forthright Meera, Sunil (AM) is quieter but more demanding of parental attention, Kulwant’s (AWOW) siblings are none as bright as her though they are as caring towards her mother. The same is true of Sumitra’s (SS) siblings, who actually suffer a lot in their new home, but care for the mother who has to go out to work and suffers there as much as they do in their strange new school. Satchin and Maya’s (OHSW) bond is shown to be the most balanced among brother and sister relationships. Satchin almost takes on the role of protector and caregiver for his little
Sister after they are abandoned by their father and move to the East End: “Once inside the bedsit, Satchin heated up whatever Amma had made for us, and we ate together, washed up the dishes, tried to do our homework and waited for our mother to come home” (OHSW 45).

Sorrority takes on a poignant dimension in Shibani Roychoudhury’s short story “Sisters” in Flaming Spirit in which two sisters are separated from each other due to emigration formalities. The ways in which the British Government’s attempts to separate families (Brah: 2006) affected the lowly, uneducated Bangladeshi immigrants is brought out in this story. The younger Nazia finds it very hard to be separated from her older sister Shirin who has to stay behind with an aunt in Bangladesh, as she is refused visa into Britain. She is inconsolable when bad news arrives about a devastating cyclone back home, and finds solace from friends, her compatriot Rebecca and the white British girl Maxine who seem, at the end of the story to look after her like Shirin once did. Tanika Gupta’s “Rebecca and the Neighbours” in the same volume details the tragic fate of Rebecca, a spunky young girl who resisted disturbing racist neighbours but was silenced into shock by brutal rape, and had to be sent away to India to find her peace. Her younger sister Savitri finds this out years later from an elderly white neighbour who had then cared for Rebecca and concealed everything from their parents. The story ends with silent Rebecca finally replying to her sister’s many letters by a short but positive note. In an overall perspective, siblings are shown as most South Asians would like to see them, flesh and blood characters full of love and affection, who make childhood pleasant and memorable, sometimes less harsh and bearable even, who often act as parent substitutes, and remain forever as special entities in one’s childhood memories. They make the home a dear and loving space, childhood a sweet and cushioned time, they make it possible to absorb all grief and snatch some happiness from it. This is especially true of the families, which have been declassed or are facing financial crises, to whom poverty brings new bonding of dependability and trust, like the Kathis in Preethi Nair’s novel (OHSW) and the Patels in Sumitra’s Story. Thus, class and race together cut deep across fields of power and privilege in the BrAsian migrant’s life, showing how these relate intersectionally to produce family bondings in gendered social spaces, which later lead to agency-formation among migrant women.
Role Played By Grandparents, Especially Grandmothers.

Grandmothers are often given a special role in the novels, and, along with parents, they act as powerful influences on the protagonists in their childhood. Notably, there is Meena’s Nanima (AM) and Satchin and Maya’s Ammamma (OHSW), who leave indelible impressions of kindness and strength in adverse circumstances, and who are deliberately portrayed as mysterious and capable of secret powers.

The grandmother figure is powerfully used in Anita and Me to revoke the memory of earlier times, the pleasures or pains in the home country, experiences which are accessible to the child through memory and family lore alone. She is the one who instills a curiosity mingled with fascination for stories about India in the preteens Meena. In her mindscape, Nanima appears as “sorcerer” working magic on the unpacifiable Sunil, her little brother, with “her pyjama bottoms flapping like Hermes’ wings at her ankles whilst he laughed with delight and tried to catch the sparks fizzing from her fingertips” (AM 207-208). Meena revels in the after-dinner stories about India, its rural, feudal and colonial past that Nanima keeps narrating, and one day realizes that she “desperately wanted to visit India and claim some of this magic as mine” (211). In moments like these, Meena often becomes proud of her grandmother and is able to realize that part of her spunky, adventurous spirit and her desire to be someone else is actually bequeathed by her Nanima, a gutsy Punjabi village woman. She also finally learns that part of the history and mystery of India and its colourful past, of which she was often ashamed during school history lessons, is the reason why she is here, and though the “goras” are so hateful to her elders, she needs University education in Britain to fulfill her parents’ dream and lifelong aspiration, the motive behind their emigration. The grandmother figure thus not only prepares the child to face the world boldly, and be proud of her roots no matter which country she has chosen to adopt, but rekindles self-worth and a sense of identification with her people, their vast history and eventful past. Thus even in the ten-year old child, so remote from her roots, the grandmother instills a sense of respect for the nation which her parents with all their anti-local snobbery, strictness and ghazal-singing could not. Situated in the strictly domestic space, nanima could help Meena find a firm footing in the wider social arena by rekindling the sparks of collective memory of the nation left behind.

Ammamma in One Hundred Shades of White is full of magical culinary
powers, which helps her to wreak changes in people’s lives. But unfortunately in her own daughter Nalini’s as well as her own life, nothing seemed to have worked out right for too long. Herself having been abandoned by her husband, she had started a new life with her daughter, who married against her wishes, above her station and suffered later. But Maya the narrator records how the grandmother worked hard to keep them in comfort and the semblance of a good life as long as they were in India. She even remembers the little lessons she taught them, the stories and legends they heard from her in times of loneliness and grief. Maya’s letters to her grandmother, which never reach her, are reminders of her need and longing to have her share their joys and pains in the unknown country. The alternating narration by the mother and daughter pair gives a back and forth quality to the story and gives a differing perspective to the same incident, say, Ammamma’s deliberate, total dissolution of all ties with the Kathis once they leave India. Nalini records only how her mother said nothing but could not be persuaded to accompany them to England. She writes: “My mother said it was time that she went back to her home and so, after helping us pack, she left, saying that she would see us all again very soon. I never saw her again though, and the letters I subsequently sent to her went unanswered” (80). But when Maya affectionately remembers the farewell, she remembers what her grandmother said before, and during the parting: “Mol, sometimes when you have to say goodbye it will feel like there is a monsoon inside. When it feels like this, breathe”” (17), and how “I was sitting in the car, trying desperately not to cry, thinking how it was possible to have the monsoon drumming inside and not let it show. I breathed and tried not to look at her” (ibid). Maya regrets not having taken a last look at her, and always remembers her words in crisis. The extended emotional bond between Maya and her grandmother seems like a symbolic representation of their Indian roots, always carried with their family baggage, their spices and the kitchen deity. So pervasive was this presence that the novel concludes with Maya’s wedding feast, during which she remembered walking along the beach with her Ammamma as a child, who seemed to say, “I will always, always be there for you, even on the days of doubting” (294).

The portrayal of the grandmother as raconteur, as chronicler of history and family lore, as nurturer, pillar of strength, moral counsellor, appears to enrich the texts by foregrounding the value system the family leaves behind for material pursuits. The elderly Indian woman often provides the BrAsian girl the confidence to face racist
bullying as with Meena and Maya, and other adversities in adulthood, as in the case of Maya, later in the text. Thus the grandmother’s presence enable the BrAsian child in these texts, give her cognitive and corporal agency in the face of discrimination, or overarching materialism, or even betrayal in love beyond the strictly domestic spaces into larger social and spatial geographies of power.

**Influence Of Family Friends And Neighbours.**

One of the very important influences on BrAsian families, and the children especially, is that of individuals and the community, playing a vital role in their rehabilitation in the alien land. This influence acts as a major sub-theme in the texts. The texts portray family friends and benefactors playing vital roles in the lives of some of these unfortunate families who might have fallen into bad times, like the Kathis or the Patels. They might be BrAsian or white British, old or young, male or female, from the same or different class origin, but their voluntary engagement with the rehabilitation of the BrAsian families intercuts race, gender, class, religion and age.

Sumitra’s aunt and her family do help the Patels in their early days in Britain, but they expect allegiance in different forms: the girls must help Motiben with her cooking, obey Jayant’s diktats in matters of friendship or socialisation, and even religious instruction. But unexpected, and totally selfless help comes from Maria and Martin, white neighbours who are also alone and crave for love and affection themselves. Martin is so attached to the younger children that he regularly takes them out and spends time with them like a member of their family. Maria helps Sumitra with English and the basics of expected social behaviour in England so useful for the family for communicating with the mainstream. With her help Sumitra is able to take up a part-time job along with studies, and decide with full-blooded agency about her priorities in life.

*Anita and Me* portrays neighbours in great detail, and the way Meena interacts with them, impacts upon her love for home, her sense of location as a BrAsian child in ways they would never have imagined. Seeing Mrs. Worall caring for her invalid husband makes Meena aware of the depth of human affection. The love Meena receives from Mr. Ormerod, Mr. Turvey, Mrs. Christmas, Uncle Alan, Hairy Neddy and the other loving neighbours who call her “Meena chick” or “Our Meena” fondly, as they would call their own children, help her to feel that she really belonged to Tollington, among the working class people with whom her parents would hardly
associate. Like Mrs. Worall, she found the Tollington women symbols of “a stoic muscular resistance which made them ask for nothing and expect less”, as if God “had simply forgotten them” (67). Meera Syal has effectively recast these working class characters of the 1970s representing “Brummy life” from her store of autobiographical memory, and with her vast imagination, invested them with a dignity and respect that their class is usually denied.

Maya’s (OHSW) life is profoundly altered with the helpful interference from Tom and Maggie, slight acquaintances who become good friends. Maggie, for example, Tom’s “sister” is an Irishwoman who takes so much care of this unfortunate immigrant family that she becomes indispensable in Maya’s life, her closest confidante and dearest friend. Maya’s mother and brother also look upon Maggie as a relative more than a friend, and overlook her questionable social status. Tom who is actually in love with Maya’s mother never makes claims on her affections, but always stays close by, providing support and organizing resources for the family to survive with dignity. The story gradually reveals that extreme sorrow and pain that Maggie herself had suffered makes her more generous and protective towards the Kathis, thus eliding all distinctions of race, colour, class and culture. After all, the text seems to suggest, what matters most to the abandoned family is the spirit to fight. Despite problems with the locals at the East End, who have their own sets of problems anyway, the children encounter more of love and affection than any deliberate acts of unkindness in their new and unfamiliar place of residence, and this probably makes the children more open to, more liberally grounded questions of racial difference and uniqueness. The text validates the thesis of this chapter that the novels considered here deal with this problem of assimilation of BrAsians as a diaspora into the mainstream in all its variety and there are unique negotiations to each special circumstance that may befall an individual in any metropolitan area in Britain.

The white British family friends actually bring out the best in the children, giving them the love, companionship and attention they might have sought from their parents and had been denied. Avtar Brah notes how the whites and Asians “communicated happily, either through non-verbal signs, forms of creolised English or through children” (2006: 43). In a way, then, the supportive role of the friends from the majority community in two of the typical texts belies all discussion of racist practices, and makes one fall back on the time-honoured values of caring, friendship and hospitality across cultures. Later sections show how partly, some of this kind of
support makes the occasional bullying or racist attack bearable, and how BrAsian children in these texts negotiate through these once out of home, in public spaces, like the street, the common backyard, and largely, the school.

**Girl-Child's Position Of Power At Home.**
The BrAsian home of the 1960s and 70s was almost like the microcosm of the BrAsian community itself. Its functioning depended on largely transnational values and norms, patriarchal traditions of control and domination, as Gail Low (1999) suggests. The BrAsian child, as the texts show, tries to conform, but the inequities of power existing outside the domestic spaces mark the behavioural norms inside. For example, Sumitra’s Bap and Mai face bitter discrimination on account of their non-metropolitan origin, their dependence on friends and their inability to communicate in English. Their home bears indelible marks of their disappointment on their forced migration. Uganda emerges as the haven for them, followed by an India they had long left, whereas Britain can at best be a temporary shelter till better times arrive. Sumitra is relatively empowered at home, due to her education and the use of English, but empowerment does not guarantee ultimate freedom, it makes her assets more useful to the family in times of need, her parents always grudge her little pleasures derived outside the house: they take it as a repudiation of their authority.

On the other hand, Meena’s parents chose to live in Britain for the sake of a better future, and their colonial education and urban exposure in India equip them to assimilate more readily. Though in both cases the daughters readily imbibe British mores, there is greater restriction in Sumitra’s household, born out of fear and insecurity of her literate but uneducated parents. Meena finds only white British children to play with or take as role models, and she is genuinely more free to spend time with them. Thus class, country of origin, education level of parents, desire to control and dominate determine the girl child’s position in a BrAsian home.

### 2.4 Schooling And Education: Importance of Good Performance.

It needs to be mentioned that despite some irregularities, the home was the most protected place, and that outside spaces were often unsafe and hostile to BrAsians, especially children. Before any discussion on the issues of the child’s life spent outside the protection of the home, at school, for example, it is important to note that the portraits of these places are almost always linked with some or the other instance of racism. However, it is also important to see how certain strategies used by
the writers create the effect of subsuming the issue of racism into the other concerns that need the reader's attention, as discussed in 2.7. The following four sections deal with schooling, performance, racism encountered at school, the street, the yard or the playground, which are the social locations of power among children. According to the concepts of the *Bildungsroman*, negotiating the outside social spaces are crucial to the development of the identity of the child, and formal education "provides a context in which social rules and values can be acquired, internalized, and evaluated" (Abel 7). But as observed earlier (section 2.1), in case of the female *Bildungsroman*, along with formal education there are "nurturing roles" which social expectation leads her to adopt. Moreover, the female protagonist of these novels is believed to suffer "loss and discontent" early in the novel, and in the BrAsian novels gender and class related power conflicts in the protagonist's childhood are foregrounded clearly. These power negotiations related to education and family values or parental expectations are discussed next, followed by BrAsian children's response to racism. The issue of "culture-conflict" versus multiple axes of race-class-gender issues is then discussed, before the focus is turned to friendship, the need to assimilate and the phenomenon of cultural navigation as a response to this need.

To return to a discussion of life outside of home, it may be worth devoting a major part of this section to a discussion on British school-life, which gives new opportunities and threats to the young BrAsian immigrant. The British system of education follows a distinctly classed pattern, providing free and compulsory education for all up to school level, in public schools (run by the government), whereas private schools offer the same curriculum taught in a different method for a higher fee (www.wikipedia.org). The better students of the public school can opt for a competitive environment in a grammar school, where they have to compete to seek entry after eleven years of age. The other average students continue studying in the local comprehensive schools which offer state sponsored education for children with all kinds of learning capabilities. These schools, if they are located in cities or suburbs where there are a number of other communities with their own subcultures, show some consideration for these by officially celebrating some of their festivals in the schools. Among the affluent BrAsians there is a distinct preference for private schools, but working-class BrAsian parents opt for the local comprehensive till they can afford private schools. Religious instruction is offered in certain specific locations to children of a specific community at their request, as in a supplementary school for
Muslims in say, Bradford (Ballard 1994). Most BrAsians study beyond high school level, and take initiatives to integrate their training with lucrative professions guaranteeing steady income more than anything else. “As compared with the white majority, a much higher proportion of young South Asians continue in full-time education and training beyond the age of sixteen, and their rate of enrolment on degree courses is nearly double the white norm” (Ballard 1994a: 103).

In the early years of migration in the 1960s and 70s, school-dinners and uniforms were a matter of expense, and added to that was the restrictions on food for vegetarians and those who refused to eat pork or beef. The length of the skirt was an issue, as Avtar Brah (1996) points out. Learning the language English, not spoken or spoken incorrectly at home caused problems, along with poor reading habits or lack of resources to read, as Barrie Wade shows in his questionnaire and analysis (1992). The school curriculum did not really train the students for the work they were going to find, after being screened through discrimination and rejection at several levels (Alexander 2006; Thandi 2006). Thus “schooling” entailed several “learning” outcomes for the BrAsian child, as the texts will corroborate, with the novelists blend of memory, imagination and selection of relevant details. They learnt how to stay hungry to avoid Indian food, how to juggle masses of homework with domestic chores, how to keep a low profile to avoid bullying, and how to ignore racial stereotyping or skewed history even in the curriculum. More importantly, they learnt how to respond to racial discrimination which was invariably gendered, viz, that BrAsian girls have limited aspirations outside marriage and domesticity, that they are under-achievers, slow-learners, lazy and indifferent (Ghuman 1999; Mamon 2004). Mamon reports,

The real facts that underlie what the media, educationalists and policy-makers term the underachievement of Black children are far more complex than is often realised. Only by developing a long-term and relative perspective on the statistics of educational performance and achievement, within a context that acknowledges class, social and local factors, as well as the differential impacts of current educational policy, can a true picture be obtained. Addressing the widespread concern in the Black community about education demands more than simplistically blaming either teacher racism or Black culture. (2004)

In fact not much literature is found determining the excellent performance of BrAsian girls: there is much greater focus on the issue of the veil or on poor school performance, the most visible stereotypes (Shain 2006). Shain discusses in her paper
how “despite this public fascination with Asian girls, they still rarely feature in educational research especially when it comes to issues of achievement where the focus has predominantly been on the ‘success’ of girls as a general category or the ‘failure’ of white working class boys”. She shows in her paper, how the selected sample of working class Asian girls aged 13-16, “were both positioned and positioned themselves against the dominant discourse of both the ideal pupil and the typical Asian girl by taking part in a number of rule breaking activities as well as engaging in a process of self exclusion from learning”. Unable to steer clear of these trajectories of gendered, class and racial discrimination, many second-generation BrAsian girl-students did become drop-outs, and still do (David B: 2005). But just as many did, and continue to perform and struggle in their chosen field, or diversify, downgrade their aspiration to pursue higher education, and go into training or secretarial jobs instead of becoming doctors or engineers (Lahiri 2006). These were some of the problems which overshadowed the frequent exposure to racist bullying children faced in schools.

Most BrAsian families see education as the legitimate way to a better future, especially professional education in technical subjects. The highest goal in the BrAsian families is for the children to do well in academics rather than other aspects of the curriculum. Documents like Ballard’s book support this social observation about the Indian community anywhere in Britain. Children in these families face a lot of pressure to continue to perform well, uniformly, and to take up professional careers, specially in technical fields, whether they are really interested in doing so or not.

In Anita and Me Meera Syal shows how the child Meena is pampered, cajoled, and finally pushed into sitting for her eleven-plus exams, her big day being hyped out of proportion. Meena has been introduced to the utmost importance of this exam by her parents, and she knew that she just had to pass. She says, with reference to what her mother had said earlier about lack of opportunities in India, “If I failed, my parents’ five thousand mile journey would have all been for nothing. It was not even summer and I was dreading next year” (213). Meena does not articulate it, but she is also caught up in the material aspirations of her parents, of doing well in terms of earning money through a professional career. But of course they appear to balance their approach to life by not giving in to conspicuous consumption. So, their decision to move out of the decrepit ex-mining town of Tollington, now a developer’s
paradise, to a “new bungalow” closer to Meena’s new school, with a garage, and a large, landscaped garden in a predominantly Hindu area, is also apparently in keeping with convenience rather than social climbing. However, young as she is, Meena manages to put in a word to the reader, about how disappointed she was that during her parents’ visit to the Big House of Harry and Mirielle Singh, they had talked about “property and money” (326). She also shows her distaste for “bodies and breakdowns” and delights in keeping her options for a career open when Aunt Shaila gifts her a beautiful pen to write “all those top-class medical essays” (328) in her new grammar school. Moreover, Meena was alive to the fact that she was being fed history in school in a way that did not match the stories culled from the collective memory of her family: they “did” India at school, but only saw servile images of Indians, or exotic ones with tigers, or violent ones like the Black Hole of Calcutta. None of these images matched the tales of British oppression or cruelty, the violence of Partition which Nanima and her family narrated. They also saw mediated images from contemporary India which showed “hollow-eyed skeletons” suffering in drought, or how “machete-wielding thugs tore into each other in messy streets” (211) because of the “mess my relatives had made of India since the British had left them” (212). Thus her cognitive agency develops early in Meena’s school-life, awakening her oppositional consciousness, despite her typically early-BrAsian transnational socio-cultural positioning of the 1970s.

The other texts, which show other families where education is a priority over everything else, are Randhawa’s *A Wicked Old Woman, Hari-jan* and Preethi Nair’s *One Hundred Shades Of White*. It is also important to note that all the texts highlight the good performance of the children for example Sumitra, Kulwant, Harjinder and Ghazala (*H.J*), Meena, Sunita, Tania, Maya, are all good students. Even Tahira or Nasreen (*RB*) who are Muslim girls of conservative Pakistani origin, and are of a lower class background, make efforts to ensure and maintain a reasonably good performance and their mothers support them in their own ways. However, it may be wrong to generalize about the good performance of Indian children in schools, as there is always a dilemma that an Indian child from a traditional background faces in a typical British school.

*Sumitra’s Story* is one text, which unfolds a very important though different dimension regarding education in British schools and the over-burdened girl-child from a typical Indian family. It is true that the text develops a stereotype of the
domesticated BrAsian girl, as things like these did happen in BrAsian migrant communities of the first wave in the 1960s and 70s. But there is light at the end of the tunnel for Sumitra, though her initial years are difficult. On arrival in Britain, Sumitra’s parents send their children to school even in the direst of conditions, in order to give them a better “chance” in life: “Education was a means to keep her confined. ‘You must study hard,’ Mai told her. ‘That is why we came, to give you girls a good education. You must learn well and pass exams, then you can marry a fine man and be rich, have a good life’” (SS 51). Thus the impulse behind good education is not financial independence but another way of ensuring that the female body and mind is available for the labour sector to exploit and the consumerist culture to be firmly entrenched through successive generations of educated BrAsians.

But like most other South Asian girls from the lower classes, she is expected to do so much of housework that she has no time to study. Initially there is also no quiet place for her and her sisters to study. Her teachers keep writing comments on the want of effort in their homework, but of course they have no idea of the amount of housework they had to do initially, to help out the relatives who had given them shelter, and later in their own home. All this is especially problematic because most of the cooking is elaborate and traditional, the number of people and meals are too large, and Mrs. Patel is too frightened to go out to the launderette or cornershop alone. The children have to help cook, iron, wash, clean and look after other siblings. Sumitra also works to supplement her family’s meager income, so there is actually no free time for her. The traditional Indian family, on its way to become a modern BrAsian family, exploits Sumitra’s body and mind to grow in status. Her life is stretched between the geometric axes of power that test her limits as a diasporic subject and as a bearer of the transnational construct of Indian womanhood.

As discussed before, Sumitra finds herself torn between her role as daughter, student and working girl. She herself talks to her principal regarding her poor performance, later, and promises to find a way out, thus carefully avoiding a possible meeting between her family and her white British Principal, Mr. Jones:

“Shall I go and see your parents?” he asked.
“After all, I imagine that one of the reasons they came to England was so that you could have a good education.”
She sighed. She felt as if she was a bridge between two countries, two banks that would never meet kindly, two cultures that could never merge.” (SS 35-36)
Alison Shaw (1994) attests to this fictional portrayal in one of the essays on the Pakistani community at Oxford, but what she says has a bearing on other subcontinental families as well:

... I found that the great majority of schoolgirls accepted the roles which their families and biradaris expected them to fulfil with few, if any, questions. As they moved through their teens, their interest in schoolwork declined as they gradually began to take on more responsible roles both at home and in the community at large. (55)

Thus dealing with racism and discrimination on the basis of skin colour are only part of the complex problems of girls like Sumitra framed in their historical position as they were. Today, there may be many more different issues which exclude the BrAsian girl from approaching courses of her choice, the first being this kind of stereotyping, followed by racial, religious, gender and class discrimination (Shain 2005). Over the last forty years, there have been peculiar, interdependent causes which may add up to an unbearable compendium to choke the educational aspirations of some young BrAsian girls, or pressurise them to pursue courses inappropriate to their talent or choice. As Buchi Emecheta (1986) writes in her autobiography, *Head Above Water*, smaller classrooms, more attention, teaching methods suited to slow learners, alternative teaching methods, more discipline would make for reduced drop-out rates among immigrant children of the lower classes (183).

The dilemma of the BrAsian student at school may not be an isolated case, most societies have their dominant groups, which reject or resist the presence of a different sub-group, due to class, religion, language or any other matter. But the problem with the BrAsians and the British lies in the utter exclusivity practiced by the two communities based on deep-rooted racialist attitudes. Werbner rightly, though mildly, points out that “Being South Asian is a racialised identity in Britain and South Asians are subject to racist stereotyping, vilification and even physical attack” (2004: 902).

**2.5 Racism At School/ Street/ Yard/ Playground. Social Location Of Power Among Children.**

In this section the ways of negotiating racism will be examined, in spaces outside the home, i.e. at school, in the street, or in the playground. It should be said at the outset that a lot of the problems are of the mindset of the two societies, British and Asian. The Indians, Hindus mostly, feel that the *mlecchha* or meat-eating, therefore
polluted British or “goras”, who do not respect marriage, are loud and quarrelsome in
their frequent drinking bouts, have “shameless” girls and women, are unclean and are
therefore best kept away from their homes. Other than the first objection, all others
are shared by the BrAsian Muslims as well. The British think that the “wogs” with
their noisy talk, their loud mannerisms, teeming families, garlicky food are all out to
overcrowd their homeland. They feel that with so much of favourable treatment from
the government they will take their jobs and civic amenities away. This belief is
imprinted in the children’s minds in both communities and they respond, as occasion
prompts, to perceived attacks on their culture (Brah 1979; Ballard 1994).

The authors do refer to racial discrimination at school in detail, but there is a
conscious foregrounding of class, intellectual or gender oriented discrimination along
with the issue of race. Most of the adult racist ideas are developed at school among
children, as we will find every text dealing with this. The school, a troublesome area
between home and the wider world, with its semblance of authority and righteousness,
is often a hotbed of racist action perpetrated both by teachers and students. E.R.
Braithwaite’s novel To Sir, with love (Jove Books, 1959) illustrates this finely, but for
the most detailed picture of racism in comprehensive schools in contemporary
London, one must read the novel The Red Box (1991) by Farhana Sheikh, a British
novelist of Pakistani origin.

**Gender/Class Issues: Pressures To Conform.**

The novel describes the impact of racism on young Muslim girls, boys and on
the mothers and their families, caught between poverty and ambition on the one hand,
religion and the desire for freedom on the other. But Sheikh takes the focus away
from issues of racism to patriarchal and class oppression of the young girls and their
mothers, which becomes a more serious concern of the novel than anything. As Mala
Pandurang (2001) observes, “Sheikh reminds the reader that the degree or range of
choices open to Asian women depends on the economic, religious, racial and
patriarchal power-relations into which women are tied” (22).

In this novel, the young students Nasreen and Tahira feel “proud to be
Muslims” and yet ashamed that they are Asian children who always get beaten up in
school “... as though we can’t help ourselves, we can’t defend ourselves” and “the
English think we’re frightened ...” And “we want to get them back but we can’t” (RB
15). In their own ways they try to respond to the situation, going through the pains of
suppression and longing for freedom to be themselves, but sometimes things become
unbearable, like when Nasreen, thinking about racist incidents, gets into a fit and attacks a boy in class itself (119). Nasreen and Tahira are both also very disturbed about their parents being treated badly by the white mainstream, and they want to flout their Asianness rather than change their image into an assimilatory one. Later in the novel, they begin to participate in retaliatory movements organized by the local Pakistani boys. Thus we encounter yet another example of how racism, sexism, class and religious divides intersect to create oppressive circles of power among BrAsian second generation girls.

In case of the experiences of exclusion at school, these texts record a somewhat similar variety of experiences, which are yet unique because of the social and spatial configuration of the characters involved. Sumitra in Rukshana Smith’s novel (SS) experiences a rather inclusive and friendly set of people at her school, like her friend Hilary and Lynne Baker whose mother even mediates when there are problems about Sumitra’s going to a pub. However, Sumitra’s younger sisters are frightened to go to school because of racist abuses hurled at them. Innocent of the implication of the word “Paki”, they try to locate its meaning in the dictionary which tells them nothing. As soon as he learns the loathsome explanation, Sumitra’s father rages against the British and their uncultured behaviour.

In her mind, Sumitra hears a hundred questions raging: why were they hated in Uganda and been told to hate the black people there, and now why did they have to hate the whites in England and be hated themselves? Political unsettlement leads to changes in social structures in her short life of fourteen years. She finds an answer herself, and through the mediation of her older white friend Maria, learns that poverty breeds more hate, and that “Name-calling and fighting each other won’t change anything. But things have got to change, for your sake and my sake and Sally’s (Maria’s daughter) sake...You’ve got to stand up and show that you’ve got the same needs ands rights as anyone else!” (47)

Later Sumitra realizes that the many questions arising in her mind are related to the various inadequacies that people try to hide in the name of colour, when they do not get jobs or houses blaming black, brown or white people, depending on who they themselves are. Sumitra’s fear is that of an incipient socialist, somewhat idealistically pondering that “That way they would never meet, never discover that really they were the same” (ibid).

Even though it may seem a little repetitive, it should be noted that in some
cases, white friends turn out to be protectors and their friendly overtures help the protagonists and their families to integrate. In “Sisters”, (see 2.3), Nazia is befriended by Maxine, a white girl, who was earlier a bit of a bully, but who lends her support and gives her solace. Their friendship happens while they are being punished for fighting, Maxine having been the offender. Later, window-shopping for dresses they could never afford, they become friendlier, and their friendship continues much further. Maxine even gets the class to collect funds for cyclone victims of Bangladesh, one of whom might have been Nazia’s beloved elder sister Shirin, left behind due to immigration problems. In Sumitra’s Story Hilary and others give her a helping hand in any crisis, though not necessarily involving racial issues.

Though Sumitra herself has very helpful, intimate and responsible white British friends, it is not a uniformly validated experience for all children in her social circumstance. Indeed the problems faced by children in school can often take a violent or a serious turn, and the “Authority” is then mostly in the habit of looking the other way. Meena in Anita and Me is threatened and hit with a splintered wooden ruler by the teacher, who had allowed the class to laugh at Peter’s racist remark earlier. Farhana Sheikh’s novel The Red Box gives a detailed account of indifference and even compliance with racist forces exhibited by some of the teachers in high places, and some support given by the saner ones who are themselves punished or ostracised for being disloyal or soft. Except for one or two white teachers, Nasreen and Tahira find that they do not get active mediation during situations purporting to racial harrassment, even from teachers from their own ethnic background like Mr. Aslam. “Half the teachers in this school are racialists,” says Tahira, and adds, “They don’t help you, that’s the only thing they do, they don’t help you” (RB 16). Nasreen also says that she feels that she can imagine what the teachers actually think of them, and that they are not on their side really. Preethi Nair also portrays this kind of treatment meted out to Maya in her novel, when Maya hits Mark Fitzgerald and the Principal Mr. Mauldy scolds her, and even threatens to throw her out if she repeats such bad behaviour (OHSW 38).

Retaliation in response to racism.

Interestingly, some authors show how children use ingenious methods to still want to belong to the mainstream group, despite exclusion practiced on them. Anita and Me shows Meena using mimicry of a particular type to her advantage: she mimics
the Tollington accent perfectly, using the correct slang on occasions, daring to do what she could not under the eyes of her watchful parents, putting up an innocent face and laying the blame on the innocent “cousins” Pinky and Baby when she stole money from Mr. Ormerod’s shop, for example. In other words, Meena knows that she will find rejection on account of her class and race from those she wishes to befriend, and the important thing to do in order to survive within the normative is to transgress moral and social, here class, boundaries.

Preethi Nair also portrays the need for conformity experienced by children in the possibility of exclusion. After confronting Mark Fitzgerald, and his supporters once, Maya (OHSW) decides to survive, peacefully, without compromising her dignity. She devises ingenious games by narrating colorful stories “with bizarre twists of fate” and gives the demonic roles to the offending, energetic boys who act out their parts willingly under her direction. She retains her popularity in this way, and cleverly controls the boys’ anger and desire for violence. The way her brother Satchin coped with exclusion was also a unique though not unusual strategy: he acted the clown, mimicking and entertaining the crowd whenever opportunity came his way, and tried to help the other children if they had problems of any kind. He could thereby conflate his identity on the others and not have to stand out on account of the colour of his skin: “He imitated his teacher really well, curling up his lip and speaking like she did. He was always full of bright ideas and if any of the kids had problems, he would find a way around it” (OHSW 43).

The resourceful ways in which the children counteract racialised stereotyping among their peers, is one way of growing up, as signalled by the conventions of the Bildungsroman: societal forces in the form of racial notions about their identity is strongly contested by these quick-witted BrAsian children who consciously undermine these forces by humour, mimicry and play-acting, which is the hallmark of BrAsian television comedy series in the 1980s, 90s and after like Tandoori Nights (1985; 1987), Goodness Gracious Me! (1996-2001) and The Kumars at No. 42 (2001-2006). Pnina Werbner’s comments on these series is relevant here. She says, “Humour defuses potential conflict and blunts racist stereotyping, while glossing over persistent tensions and ambivalences” (2004: 902).

There are detailed portrayals of some of the more spirited children retaliating in response to violent or cruel acts of racism, though the narrative does not really dwell on the incident catastrophically. Instead, these incidents are usually seen as
signs of weakness rather than strength, and are immediately followed by either different degrees of other problems or the more mature responses discussed earlier. Meena \((AM)\) gives as good as she gets from a young Peter Bradley who had disgusting habits as well, when he answers that their part of the Midlands is called the “Black Country” because “so m ... many darkies ... live here, miss?” (22). At an opportune moment she hits and hurts him and is punished by her teacher. But the narrative shifts to Meena’s anxiety over the fact that her mother, who worked nearby, would come to know about this incident, and that she had lied to her father about stealing from Mr.Ormerod’s shop. Meena remembers often, what has been told to her repeatedly: “Don’t give them a chance to say we are worse than they already think we are. You prove you are better. Always” (45). With the acquired wisdom of her early childhood, Meena acts sagaciously in future, never repeating such incidents.

Tania teaches Chila and Sunita \((LI)\) how not to show any sign of weakness in front of the bullies in school, as that could provoke only attacks and pranks. Thus the children in these portrayals deal uniquely with incidents that provoke racial inequality or bullying. These young British Punjabi girls rely on the distinctly tough aspect of their identity, as they know that their survival is bound to be a struggle against race, class and their gendered identity.

Meena’s actions are replicated by Maya, \((OHSW)\) a quiet but assertive heroine, a victim of abandonment and a sudden plunge into poverty. Her first day at the new school in the East End is rough, because racist attacks are common here. The East End is quite the cauldron of poverty, jealousy and overcrowding. Seething in the slimy mess of hatred among the several ethnic communities thrown together, a major slide down from their upper-class counterparts, the East Enders prefer to call an Asian by the name of their preference, “Paki”, a hate call. Maya does not know any of this till the first attack by a racist bully at school, and she puts it down to bullying, after pummeling the boy well, in front of everybody around the playground, to end the matter once and for all. After Mr.Mauldy scolds her, there is no authorial comment except how tired Maya was, and how much she longed to sleep. Maya confesses to Maggie, and conceals the incident from her mother, because Maggie, the elderly white British neighbour, pacifies her with a perspective different from her mother’s, strengthening her instead of reinforcing her helplessness. When her mother asks her about her new school, Maya says that she made lots of new friends. Maya’s mature reaction is worth quoting: “Ammamma sometimes said to do things to make other
people happy and then it would make you feel happy, but I didn’t feel anything when I said that. Maybe it was because I felt bad about what I had done to Mark Fitzgerald” (40).

Sometimes a racist encounter in childhood helps one to cope with a similar challenge in adulthood. In her schooldays when Angie (7) went to the disco with her friend Maggie, she faced a frightening, unprovoked attack by Pauline Metcalf, a white girl who was protectively jealous about her boyfriend’s interest in Angie. She and her friends stood near Angie and went on lighting matches as if to light her cigarette, but only to drop them near her or on her body. Back then; Angie had sat paralysed till she was picked up by her father. Later, in her adult life, a drunken, dazed elderly white British woman attacked her with a broken bottle in the underground, but Angie mustered the courage to push her and assume control. No one helped her out, everyone sat and watched, but Angie could resist the racist advance effectively alone (254).

Not Merely ‘Culture-Conflict.’
Martina Michel points out how the media has so far upheld the “cultural” and “psychological” dilemma of Asian youth and how sociologists have reinforced this notion through their research, Michel (1998) writes:

Young Asians living in Britain have thus been conceptualized as fractured and rootless (migrant) subjects who are allegedly longing for the liberties of western society while at the same time being forced to obey the rules of their culturally other (here meaning non-liberated) parents. Aspects such as racism, socio-economic status, etc. are brushed aside. (144)

There is hardly any truth in the statement that the second generation BrAsian is caught only in a culture conflict, it is more correct to say that s/he is also a victim of essentialisation and branding by the racist policies and actions of the mainstream white community, and the problems peculiar to her own community, class and gender. The young Asian person, according to the texts analysed here, uses ingenious methods, if s/he can, to steer clear of trouble. The novels studied in this project bring out the fact that the oppositional identity of the BrAsian youngster emerges out of the simultaneous interplay of gender, education, class and sense of security of the specific community. Their identity is negotiated within circles of power politics which denies BrAsians agency, stereotypes their identity and compromises their sociocultural position.

Education definitely impacts upon the attitude of the girl children towards their social position. As said earlier, the novels examine the impact of school education on the children, especially girls, who might not have been able to have access to such a kind of education in India had they belonged to the working class as in Britain. The BrAsian girls who have acquired education for a better chance in life, as their parents say, \((AM, SS)\) do make use of this education to assert their identity in most of the situations, as South Asian girls of a similar social class elsewhere may not be able to do. Education brings them closer to the truth about life, that in this world one is not discriminated only on grounds of one’s colour, but being a woman, or coming from a lower social class has a role to play in the position one can carve out for oneself. Raisa realizes this in *The Red Box*, when a male candidate supercedes her: “He was more experienced – they had said – and interviewed brilliantly” \((RB\, 227)\).

Sumitra, much younger than Raisa, and from a different social class and family background, has a different set of problems. Even though she seeks education, her performance suffers because of her social position as seen in 2.3. Going to night school, Sumitra works in order to become an airhostess one day. Sumitra feels like a bundle of contradictions when she confesses her fears to Maria: she is aware that had she not left Uganda, probably her oppositional self would not have been allowed to emerge, and though she worries about her future, she is very careful not to hurt her family, and quite afraid of being on her own as well as of the family’s response to her leaving home \((SS\, 146)\). Thus it is incorrect to assume that BrAsian girls undergo a thorough Westernisation through education in schools that they identify with completely. Unlike in a male *Bildungsroman*, the female protagonist resists being coopted into the project of materialism, so well ingrained by Thatcherism \((Srivastava in Pandurang 2001)\), by drawing strength both from her own traditional non-western cultural background and British education. For example, little Meena \((AM)\) always fantasizes of being a doctor, a writer, or someone really smart. But in her heart of hearts she wishes to fulfill her parents’ dream of studying hard, and to begin with, clear her eleven-pluses. The impact of education on Kulwant, Tania, Chila, Sunita, Angie, Meera, Maya and their friends, sisters or relatives is clear, their parents are generally able to give them education which sees them through their early youth, and then they either move on to new areas, or study or train further for better jobs. Statistics, Shain suggests \((Shain 2006)\) prove that BrAsian girls are superior in terms
of scholastic achievement, but these statistical studies are being hotly contested in the British media (Blair 2007) and by the public (comments on the article on the site), as they are now upholding poor white British male students’ performance as the result of incompetent teaching by Black and Asian teachers, and slow learning among Black and Asian students in inner-city area schools. Thus schooling and education confers a different social position for Asian girls shown in these novels, and yet brings in new problems, as well as aspirations to solve them. The role of teachers in inspiring students is generally expected to be portrayed in such autobiographical fiction, but that is not the case in BrAsian fiction: the teachers who can inspire are few and far between, and they have already been referred to here, (see 2.3) but there are similar figures who can inspire, as also discussed, like grandmothers, nurturers or friends like Maggie, *OHSW* or Martin and Maria *SS*. With the help of a few teachers and schoolmates, white British friends and family members, as well as their own emerging personalities, the young heroines of the novels seek solutions to live as they wish in a new multicultural society, seeking agency where denied, crafting identity against preconceived notions and societal norm.

### 2.6 Friendship.

Playmates and friends form a large part of this yet larger group, which helps in developing the identity of the BrAsian children. There is a conscious and continuous foregrounding of friendship among BrAsian and mainstream children in these novels, and the very fact of this suggests the psychological and cultural value attached to friendship by the authors. In order to feel accepted, wanted and to belong, the young children, especially but not only the girls, create ties of togetherness and affection that are usually quite durable as well. Sometimes these relationships are short-term, but are forever cherished and the narrative is woven around the reason why they are so memorable. Many are formed across class origins, and often last long, though some friendships do not survive the test of time and the pressure of cultural alienation.

Sumitra *SS* forms lasting bonds of love and trust in school with the upper-class Hilary, the working-class Lynne and Mark; at work with Pat, Peter, Mike, Roger and Gwynneth; and in her neighbourhood with Maria, Martin and some others of similar class origins. It is with the help of all these friends who encourage her, appreciate her talent, believe in her abilities, and provide her with support that she is
able to fulfill her ambition. With Maria’s help, Sumitra gets a job, learns better English, and finally moves out to share a flat with Gwynneth. Thus it is not true that in BrAsian fiction, only BrAsian friends can actively mediate in the lives of BrAsian girls; white friends can bring positive, holistic change in their lives as well. At the end of the novel, though Sumitra feels guilty to betray her parents, she is an adult, and has the right to assert her zest for independence to join her friends towards self-assertion rather than succumb to conservative forces at home.

In Mala’s (HSDY) life, there are three other friends, two white and one Chinese in origin. The author describes through the novel, how class identities bring these unlikely girls closer, and how they survive on barely any comfort except having each other as friends. They are not at all self-conscious in terms of race; they know that their main and common enemy is poverty and disintegrating family rather than the colour of their skin. Mala, Bethany, Janice and Caroline struggle through bullying, absent fathers, immoral or sick mothers, child abuse, orphaned siblings, drug abuse and poverty, as if these were their collective problems, and when they are twenty-one, still retain their friendship and continue to share dreams together.

Unlike Meena, the three childhood friends Tania, Sunita and Chila (LI) are the children of the 1970s London, and later, they craft an identity together, as if they are inseparable extensions of each other, though they lead independent adult lives. Syal examines the adult lives of these East End comprehensive-educated Punjabi business class second-generation girls in such a way that their childhood bonding is forever enshrined in a golden time frame. Though Tania and Sunita were born in Britain, Chila was from East Africa, a refugee, initially maladjusted, kept apart from the “normal” children. After she wrote a prize-winning essay, a swansong really, as she never performed well after that, she came into the fold, “Tania and Sunita had adopted her and discovered that the girl they’d once tagged the Dark Dumbo was funnier, sweeter and kinder than anyone else knew. They kept the secret like they kept each other’s friendship: close, to themselves” (20). Thus, even though their friendship is embedded with hostilities and inequalities of different kinds, they go on wanting to return to their friends in good and bad times even when much older.

**Need For Support: Bonding Despite Inequalities.**

Some of the close friendships portrayed in these novels acknowledge inequalities of different kinds. Though in her later novel Syal traces the presence of a vibrant business community of Punjabis in London, in Tollington (AM) in the
Midlands in the 1960s and 70s, there were hardly any Indians Meena could identify with. She actually hated her Indian “cousins” and maintained a relationship of inequality with them. She allied with her white friends in their leg pulling of these goodie-girls with their pink frocks, ribbons and oily ponytails. As she says: “My life was outside the home, with Anita, my passport to acceptance” (148). Meena’s longing for Anita’s favour smacks of hero worship, and though her approach to Tracey is one of care and concern, Tracey hardly reciprocates. With Robert Oakes at the hospital, she visualises the nearest possible version of a childhood romance. Sam Lowood never befriends her but follows her every move, perhaps admires her grudgingly, as discussed earlier. Anita’s friends Fat Sally and Sherrie, the comp-wenches, ignore her till it is no longer possible to do so, and the liit’uns follow her around as much as she hangs around Anita. Meena tries to be perfectly naturalized into working class Tollington society, but her parents berate her for it and remind her of her superior cultural traits and intellectual abilities. Surprisingly, her nanima and her father understood her need to belong, and often surreptitiously allowed what her mother might not have. Through comical references to Meena’s mother’s attitude to her English neighbours, the author poses many questions before the reader through the rambling, jolting narrative, about cherishing cultural values too rigidly, about upholding one’s notions of superiority, as against opening the arms of friendship to neighbours in an adopted country. Werbner’s opinion on the rigidity of the older generation is largely true. As Werbner (2004) comments:

The motivating allegories and central plots of the new wave diasporic aesthetics send out a critical message to the South Asian community, portraying it as still locked in the obsolete and reactionary customs and beliefs of the old country ...They satirise an older generation’s profligate consumption, false ethics, superstitious religiosity, blind prejudices and obsession with honour and status. (901)

Meena also poses to be descended from royalty occasionally, and fabricates things about Nanima to her neighbours, to elevate her Nanima’s strange foreigner status. The novelists are clear about this occasional urge in children to adopt a different persona, to deceive or exaggerate in order to fit into a desired projection of their own identity among even the closest of friends.

It is also appropriate to recall Suri’s friendship with the Kathi children (OHSW). Suri remains one of the good friends of Maya and Satchin, and in fact later Maya falls in love with him and marries him, but Maya had once found out his
weakness. He had claimed in his childhood that his parents were doctors who could afford his education, holidays and everything, but they were only hardworking shop owners who worked harder to make all of this possible for him, "He made it all up so he did not have to feel different from the other boys" (194). Inequality of social status, not colour, or race came in the way of Suri's identification with his peers, but of course Maya admits to another deception on her brother Satchin's part, he had also concealed the fact of his having a step-father to Suri.

2.7 Efforts To Assimilate Reflected Through Narrative Technique.

However, close friendships of the kinds described above are not always formed easily. The children in the novels need acceptance, and in order to be accepted by their peers, make all kinds of efforts, like trying to assimilate into the mainstream by giving up certain cultural practices. The assimilative efforts of these children lead sometimes to their acceptance among their white peers, at other times they are denied entry. Sometimes, especially when their efforts to assimilate are rejected by the white mainstream, the children themselves refuse to assimilate. These are several ways in which the second-generation BrAsians cope with their hybridity in the gendered geographies of power, in order to wrest agency and visibility, which is denied to them sometimes by their own community, or their class and even the mainstream.

Desire for Acceptance.

It seems from these texts that the otherness of the protagonist in the host country of adoption is an always already accepted fact, which is only a part of the other important aspects of her life. A much more important aspect of the writing is to throw open an ongoing debate to the reader about issues related to other aspects of her identity. This is done as if it is only a series of perplexing thoughts in the protagonist's mind regarding social acceptance, which she needs to share with the reader who, voyeuristically, becomes a participant to these thoughts. By raising other issues than racial discrimination as being equally, sometimes more crucial to survival, the writer acknowledges the occurrence of racial discrimination as an accepted, though not only, problem. The heroine who is often the narrator is older while writing the story, has well-formed notions about certain issues, but in the early pages of the novel, when she is recollecting her childhood, she seems to still need the space and time to develop these thoughts. Usually, these thoughts involve the complicated
feelings the protagonist has regarding any or all of these, as it usually happens in a Bildungsroman: her parents, her looks, her future, India and her relatives, her friends and neighbours, and the limitless desire to be accepted into the adult world soon.

Both Sumitra (SS) and Meena (AM) are very worried about acceptance in their two worlds, but Meena is more anxious to maintain friendship with her white neighbours than Sumitra, who has many other worries. Historically, Meena is older as an immigrant of the sixties, she comes from a smaller, more educated and more affluent family. Meena’s problems are related to assimilation and rejection, rather than survival. Meena worries about how soon she will be accepted by Anita as her “apprentice”, how will she maintain her trust, look, speak, and be like her, and yet many other things, like what happens in the Big House, how well will she perform in school, will she ever become the doctor she dreams of becoming, what will she need to do to acquire, maintain and marry a handsome white boyfriend, for instance.

Like Meena, the older Sumitra (SS) also needs friends, and wishes to befriend neighbours, but she has to be more focused, as she is older, and from a recently emigrated household in the early 1970s. Her commitment as part of the labour force harnessed for the well-being of the family must be kept in mind: she needs to help much more, economically, physically, and culturally, in the house. She worries about her school, career, her looks, her father’s anger, Indian men and their oppression of their wives and women of the house. Though the minor skirmishes with racism Sumitra undergoes weigh heavily on her mind, her story is that of a young British Ugandan (Indian) girl with her own special set of problems aside of generalizations by sociologists. Very frequently, then, we come across such passages in the text: “Mai and Bap did not know what she did at school, her teachers did not know what she did at home. It was as though she had three personalities: the workmate at Hanbury’s, the schoolgirl, and the daughter” (SS 91). And a few lines later, she adds, “So Sumitra plaited the three threads of her life, like the Rakhi at Rakshabandhan, trying to make them one, while each strand made its own demand upon her. School, work, home—another identity, another ethic, another personality” (ibid). These anxieties of Sumitra need to be correlated to the demands of the genre, the female Bildungsroman, which actually relocates the protagonist back into the social matrix she was trying to reject.

Both Sumitra and Kulwant (AWOW) desire freedom so much that most of the times they share their dreams or nightmares about their futures with the reader. The chronologically younger Tania, Chila and Sunita, Angie, Meera and other girls in the
later novels are not as much conscious of racial inferiority, or a sense of superiority over their Indian origins as they are about their differences with their parents and their little jealousies and rivalries with siblings and, as they grow older, their bodies, their boyfriends and careers. The texts overwhelm the reader with facts of their lifestyle made accessible at every turn, from food to dress, brand names, and streetlife, habits and customs, description of homes and other familiar spaces, instead of overplaying the occasionally unbearable social discrimination. They are the children who have survived the initial hostilities described in the earlier novels, they have inherited the desire to stay on and make it good, unlike Meera in Leena Dhingra’s *First Light* (1991) who wishes to go back to India to find solutions to her problems.

**Distancing The Present.**

Another strategic device employed is that of distancing the present. The novelist seems to shield the reader’s inquisitive gaze from the harshness of the present by locating its resemblances to the past or in stories remembered, or in fantasies built in the minds of the protagonist. This very appropriately fits in with the slightly precocious, introspective persona of the child narrator, who is no longer a child and yet narrates the incident using the observer’s perspective, sometimes allowing an occasional mature, adult aside or loud thinking to maintain a dialogue with the reader in real time. Thus, every time Sumitra hears about her sister’s or her mother’s problems, or she herself faces yet another challenge, she starts remembering those earlier days in Uganda. In her dreams her friends or favourite servants return to lend meaning to her disturbed and chaotic present. Kulwant (*AWOW*) always connects with her past, in fact her narrative rollicks in the cradle of time past and time present, to nurture her restless mind in its search for fulfillment. Meena (*AM*) wishes to snatch her share of her Indian past when she feels let down by her mates. By fantasizing her new Indian personhood, she is able to stand up to Sam, as discussed later. Chila (*LI*) paints vibrant pictures out of her African recollection when she cannot adjust to her new school, thus expressing her longing for a happier past. Memories of “divorced auntie” make Tania and Sunita (*LI*) understand man woman relationships, much later in life. Maya thinks about her grandmother or the lovely times she had with her father in London, when she is in trouble. It is these strategies of the authors, which undercut their narrative engagement with social adjustment, victimhood and otherisation in terms of race, gender and class in the selected novels. The use of memory, both
individual and collective memory, distances and mitigates the harsh reality of the present. The children’s lives in school and the larger world outside are narrated with just as much detail as their home lives, and yet again, the narrative focus is not on the failure of the individual to cope. It is instead on how she attempts to solve her own specific range of problems, depending on her family’s configuration, on the opportunity available to her, her class, her spirit (of defiance) and the support and encouragement she receives to acquire agency and subjecthood.

There may, however, be insurmountable differences between class and cultures, despite all efforts by the BrAsian girl to smooth them over with strategy and courage. The strategic placement of key incidents before the readers suggests that the novelists are careful to foreground them for certain reasons. For example, Meena (AM) starts feeling left out of the company of Anita and her cronies halfway through the novel. For one who so wholeheartedly craves to be, look, eat and talk like the English around her, this feeling was bound to create some amount of confusion, but Meena gradually steers clear of these feelings when she meets her Nanima, and later when she gets her initiation into racism through someone she admired, along with Anita: Sam Lowbridge. She realises how much her parents and other Indian elders must have tolerated the growing racism in those early days of British racial hatred against Asians initiated by Enoch Powell. Through thinly veiled discussions, snatches of conversation reported by Meena in the text, one realizes how unsettling this feeling of exclusion must have been for her (98; 112; 165-166; 173). She who wishes to be white, speaks a perfect Brummy accent, is so emotionally close to her white friends, is disillusioned by the total indifference of Anita to her, and even her deliberate cruelty later.

Anita and Sam attack the only other Indian “Paki” they know, cruelly, deliberately, kissing after that, as if relishing the act, and Anita repeats the story to her friends. This forms a kind of climax for the growing change in Meena’s understanding of her so-called mates. Meena remembers “retching quietly into the open drain” and then she races on a horse wildly, breaking her leg, as if part of her body had to reflect her emotional trauma (278-279). Soon, they also attack her with cruel notes repeatedly before her eleven-plus exams as they are aware of the inevitable upward mobility of this focused, decent Indian family. They know that they will forever remain as they are, practically living on the street, with no love or guidance at home, no hope whatever of any positive change in their rotten lives. Sam tells Meena
something about this, and as Roger Bromley (2000) remarks, he voices the anger of a “deskilled working class, whose “whiteness” is their only vestigial link with the dominant relations of power” (148). Anita and Sam are keenly jealous of Meena’s poise in dealing with her life: they are astounded by her transformation from childish fan of theirs to a clever little girl who rides a cycle for her amusement, not needing their company any more, and studies for an entry into a world inaccessible to them. The clash of values and cultures lead to irreconcilable differences among the close friends who end their childhood themselves, and with it the last vestige of amicability. From mimicry to attainment of self-hood, this is the upward growth of the narrative structure of *Anita and Me* in terms of Homi Bhabha’s theory of hybridity. Bhabha says: “in order to be effective mimicry must continually produce its slippages, its excesses, its difference... a process of disavowal” (1994: 86). Roger Bromley adds to this position by asserting that “Meena’s becoming British Asian is an active process which erases the racist Anita and Sam (a racism of powerlessness and of a downward spiral), at the same time as her location ‘unbecomes’ home to be replaced by a ‘homing desire’... She is relocated, reconfigured along an ‘Asian’ continuum, at least at the level of intention” (2000: 147).

**Impact Of Cross-Cultural Influences On Youngsters.**

Roger Ballard (1994) talks about code-switching and cultural navigation, performed daily by the second generation Asians. He calls them “skilled cultural navigators” who can keep their two worlds separate, and switch codes and cultures as appropriate to the immediate context. They prefer to keep the two contrary cultural arenas apart in order to keep peace with both the worlds that have shared in shaping their lives for them. There might be problems if the two worlds meet, so Sumitra does not want her father to meet her teacher, nor can she bring home her friend Hilary who helps her out with studies. Ballard writes in the introductory chapter:

> For example, if many Asian parents knew exactly how their daughters behaved once safely out of sight at school or college, they would be horrified – just as those same young women would be equally embarrassed if their English school-friends were more aware of how they behaved once they re-entered the ethnic colony. (31)

Maya (*OHSW*) feels torn between her two worlds as a child, and after her father abandons the family, she too makes adjustments in her routine life in order to be able to cope with the immense gulf between her culture and that of the East End.
With her mother she behaved very hurtfully, deliberately refusing to behave as expected in an Indian home:

On the days Amma was around, I found it hard, as I also did not want to be reminded of India, the good times or our culture, because things were bad enough without all of that to deal with as well. I felt we were forced to make a choice and I chose the easiest route, which was to forget the place and the culture that I was from. (50)

The author thus shows how assimilation can always be a softer option for the migrant. Yet later, after having weighed out several options of marriage and career in Europe, Maya returns to her family and childhood sweetheart, gets married in the traditional way, thinking about her grandmother. For Meena, Sumitra and Maya, the idea of total integration of their two worlds, the home and the world outside, remains an impossible dream against the overwhelming reality of their new found syncretic selves, which are capable of striding along their inherited and adopted cultures. Ballard’s remarks on Asian girls “code-switching” with two cultures is true even outside white societies: there is the immense pressure to conform to traditional culture, and the urge to adopt more modern Western social practices, anywhere in Asia, and also in non-Western postcolonial societies.

In-Betweenness As “Home” And The Diaspora Community As Family.
The result of the cross-cultural influences working on these youngsters of the 80s and 90s Britain should not be seen as doubtful or questionable in terms of their identity as BrAsians. In fact the texts seem to portray their rejection of social or cultural rigidity, they are as opposed to fundamentalism as any other type of coercion, which curbs their freedom, like racist attacks by whites. Maya, Kulwant, Sumitra, Tania, Chila and Sunita or Angie and Mira are children inheriting a new metropolitan culture which is not innocent of racial, class or gender discrimination, but to them, when they are still children in the texts, this world promises to open more opportunities than deny avenues to success and fulfillment. However, they are as poised to maintain their identity as British as they are aware of the pride in their parents to be Asians, thus there is the occasional dip into the nostalgia of the diasporic consciousness that they experience, especially in childhood. Kulwant’s (AWOW) account of this sense of India as the true home, a better place, handed down by the earlier generation, has been quoted in section 2.2.

Meena’s (AM) mother’s nostalgic evocation of her Indian home with its flat roof, mango tree, goat-milking, cobra, peacocks and sweetmeats bring it alive. But
Meena is quite self-assured and comfortable in the surroundings she has accepted as her own since childhood, unlike Meera in Leena Dhingra’s novel (FL), who has had so much of uprooting in her life that she claims only the air as her own true space. However, regardless of the inclusion felt by Meena, the network of memory and nostalgia invoked by her parents, especially the partition stories and her father’s soulful Hindi songs, make India sound “like the only home I had ever known. The songs made me realize that there was a corner of me that would be forever not England” (112). By this clever distortion of one of the most patriotic of English poems, Syal confers on young Meena the status of the individual in diaspora, permanently in search of a home.

Portrayals of childhood in these novels are often dotted with such kinds of epiphanic realizations: the little child who so longs to be like everyone else, realizes that it is a special feeling to be aware of one’s difference, however hard it may be for others to accept this fact. Importantly, it is the growth of this new consciousness that this type of immigrant writing exposes, “with the tensions and contradictory forces left unresolved” (Bromley 2000: 145). Rosemary George suggests that the feeling of being at home in the host country is a process which may or may not require assimilation, but that “the process of making oneself at home is a project that may not be completed even by several successive generations” (1996: 184). Meena is one of that new generation which negotiates the difficulty of making herself at home in a place where she does not truly belong in terms of class and social position. She is a part of that group of the second-generation which is not really transnational any more, who wish to demonstrate their hybridity, but whose exposure to the nation and to transnational contact is kept alive by the older generation, which tries to restrain their hybridity as opposed to an imagined authenticity.

Paul Gilroy (1992) argues that cultures do not have to correspond to “homogeneous nation states” and he puts forward the idea of the “rhizomorphic, fractal structure of the transcultural”, which is nowhere more apparent than in the personalities of Maya (OHSW), Tania (LI), Angie (T) and Mira (LFM), who are metropolitan yuppies with attitudes that transcend cultural ties to any one nation or state. From their childhood, they have been brought up by open-minded and careful parents like Meena’s (AM) who have imposed a sense of dignity in them first, and only then insisted on any kind of cultural allegiance. They might be found eating Indian food the Indian way, at home, or performing some form of community or
religious activity, and yet spend time outside the confines of home, in spaces that define their Britishness like the yard, the fair, the garden. In spite of an unsettling doubt in their minds as to the possibility of simultaneous loyalty to two nations and cultures, a cultural transnationalism, they grow into hybrid versions of the migrant. Though their parents had once carried transnational allegiances and ideologies that weighed heavy on their shoulders, the combined weight of the multiple cultures sit lightly on their daughters’.

The later chapters of this project substantiate the truth of this to a further and fuller extent. BrAsian girl-children of the second generation benefit substantially from education as Meena’s, Sumitra’s, Kulwant’s and Maya’s examples show. Education places them on a firmer footing than their mothers who were often incorporated into the unorganised wage labour sector, like Sumitra’s and Mala’s mothers. Friendships with the mainstream often leads to early cognitive and corporal efforts in seeking agency in the socio-cultural spaces outside home, as Sumitra, Maya ands Mala’s later lives show. The self-assured young BrAsian girls found as heroines of these novels have been influenced by their parents, grandmothers or elders caring for them, like Mrs. Worrall or Nanima (AM) or Maggie (OHSW), or Maria (SS), and they grew up to be confident adults with minds of their own. The early childhood memories of these girls provide them with the resources to develop their own agency, both of the body and the mind. Instead of growing up into tormented individuals, racked by a culture conflict, they are citizens of the world, with cultural practices, which transcend territorial or geographical specifications, as the later chapters show. In that way, they might be seen as the new inheritors of a complex, multi-layered, transnational culture, but with the option to choose hybridity over paying lip-service to the ideology of the nation. They see the diasporic space rather than the nation as the only possible, though not ideal “home”.

BrAsian Children’s Identities : Impossible To Homogenize.

The analysis just undertaken shows the inappropriateness of homogenized attitudes to BrAsian children, who are believed to be riddled with ethnicity related problems, straddling two cultures (Ballard 1994; Brah 2006; Hussain 2005). Through the framework of “gendered geographies of power” it may be observed how BrAsian children seek agency across different hierarchies of power. Meera Syal’s comments in British Council’s Connecting magazine are appropriate here:
There were so many dire predictions of how our "mongrel race" of kids would turn out and here we are, the huge irony being that it is precisely because of our two cultures that we are creative, challenging the status quo and continually asking questions about identity, belonging and self-expression. (2003)

The novels and short-stories by BrAsian women writers articulate the muted voices of BrAsian women, young or old, who is, represented as Heidi Mirza says, "without agency, without self-determination, a passive victim, waiting to be inscribed with meaning from those who wish to gaze upon her and name her" (1997: 6). This writing "asserts and reclaims our agency in the telling of who we are", and it is voices like these which serve a very important function, as Mirza adds, speaking for BrAsian and Black feminists: "Our voice, our being and our very presence within the patriarchal imperial project of sexualized racialization is to actively contest the system of which we form a part" (ibid).