Chapter: 3

Diasporic
Displacement
And
Replacement
Crossing the periphery of homeland does not revise one’s tradition because it fails to fabricate a home in the new home which is finely reflected in Asian-American writings. The course of migration in the twentieth century has produced a riddle of the very perception of geological gap and race. Post colonial studies have been preoccupied with issues of hybridity, in-between ness with mobility and crossover of ideas and problems generated by colonialism. Terms like ‘hybridity’ and ‘diaspora’ have come to characterize mixed or globalized cultures. Diaspora evokes the specific trauma of human displacement. To be in Diasporas (dia means through and sperno means scattered community) means to be in an un-belonging room. Diapora is today an undeniable fact of world ethnicity. It is commencing to engage a larger place in intercontinental financial and customs’ barter. Diasporic communities do not split their association with their homeland, but erect different relations. Devotion to cultural roots is a characteristic of the diasporic experience. On the realistic side, the Indian American needs to use its regular character which has Indian roots.

Indians in America have come to be known as a part of NRI community around the world. This diasporic community realizes that it is very hard to leave the country behind even though one has left it in a conspicuous sense. The inner character of this society is inevitably India. In the communal
structure and creative field the communications among different cultural entities have created an eclectic milieu and distinct body in the writings of Asian-American writers. Diaspora is no longer very far from Bollywood’s horizon either, in films such as Dilwale Dulhaniya Le Jayenge, Pardes, Jeans, Kal Ho Na Ho, Swadesh, diaspora community and their predicament essayed dramatically. These works tackle the ball of the ‘self’ and ‘other’. The ‘other’ has been making the existence felt both in the affirmtative and pessimistic twists, thereby forcing the observer to take note of them as human beings. The magnitude of literature of the émigré leaps from this rendezvous with the host country on the part of the immigrant.

Exile plays a major role in determining Indian English susceptibility. It is a composite evolutionary modus operandi; it is a situation involving cross-cultural shifts, loss of mother tongue, native ethos skirmishing with the new environment and the twofold drag of intellectual allegiance. Indian English writing, due to its cross-culture basis, has inherently been rotating time and again in the region of the theme of the undeniable and taxing meet between two cultures- antagonistic in their mind-set, approach and standards. The immigrant understanding is convoluted as a susceptible immigrant finds himself or herself perpetually at a passage burdened with the memories of the original home which is besieged with the authenticity of the new world.
The word ‘Home’ has always been oppugned by everyone who assayed for identity, who felt alienated in an adopted land, who tried to assimilate in a new fangled piazza. ‘Home’, for them, remains an illusion, something to be dreamed of but not to be found. Probably this is the reason almost all the leading Asian- American writers incessantly advocate the need to adapt despite the challenges thrown by a new culture and the new norms of survival.

Exploding the myth of ‘Home’ Salman Rushdie speaks of “imaginary homelands, Indias of the mind” (IH 10) in his book “Imaginary Homelands”. In the process of searching the homeland, immigrants lost their roots, routes and identity. They face a calamity of identity, disintegration of disposition, and geographical as well as cultural dislocation in an alien country. As Rushdie clarifies:

“When the Indian who writes from outside India tries to reflect that world, he is obliged to deal in broken mirrors, some of whose fragments have been irretrievably lost”. (11)

Diasporic displacement has forced the immigrant writers to accept the provisional nature of all truth and certainties. It is almost impossible for migrants to be unable to call to mind his native place and nativity
emotionally. Consequently, this displacement constitutes a double identity that is at once singular, plural and partial. As Rushdie echoes:

“Our identity is at once plural and partial. Sometimes we feel that we straddle two cultures, at other time we fall between two stools. But however, ambiguous and shifting this ground may be it is not an infertile territory for a writer to occupy”. (15)

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni belongs to a new age of East Indian writers of narrative fiction. She illustrates Indians overseas who face dislodgment, stick to their native culture, endeavor to incorporate themselves into their espoused home, and suffer strain over ethical and emotional issues. Their Indianness plays a derivative role, since she emphasizes, through their connections with Indians and other Americans.

It’s little wonder that much of Divakaruni’s writing resonates with the Indian- American immigrant experience. Many of the characters of her novels are migrants drifting from shore to shore in search of some ‘imaginary homelands’ and obviously the author identifies herself with her migrant personae. Divakaruni tried to adjust to the reality of life in an alien culture, her other life, the real one, was dimming inside her head. When she received a call from India informing her that her grandfather had passed away, Divakaruni was devastated:
“I was doing my Ph.D at Berkeley at that time and couldn’t go back for the funeral. I was very sad. My grandfather was very dear to me. One day, soon after, I was thinking of him and I couldn’t even recall his face in my mind. This frightened me. I realized how much I was forgetting about India, about India, about my growing years, about the people I loved. I started writing— with a poem to my grandfather— as an action against that forgetting.”

It is the theme of immigrant conflict – acquired values vs adopted ones – that informs a lot of Divakaruni’s work. And, the challenges of writing about two distinct worlds are many. “It’s okay to be an Indian person who loves Indian culture but now I’m an American citizen and committed to making life in this country better. We need to remain secure in our own identity but participate fully in the culture, politics and daily life of America. The important part of integration is that you don’t give up, you share.”

Divakaruni reveals, “It is the pain of leaving the homeland but also the excitement of being in a new place – that is the duality of immigration.”

The author, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni explores this duality of immigration in her novel “The Vine of Desire”, sequel to her earlier novel “Sister of My Heart” in which she writes about the emotional bond between two cousins, Anju and Sudha, whose lives have been entwined by birth in their native city
of Calcutta. We leave them leading separate lives in America and India respectively.

In “The Vine of Desire”, devastating events in both of their lives bring them together: Anju in America has had a miscarriage, and Sudha has walked out of her in-laws’ and husband’s house; she has refused to give in to their command of having an abortion when the fetus was declared to be a girl. She also is escaping from the suffocating embrace of her first love and former boyfriend, Ashok, who insists on taking care of her and her daughter. When Anju invites Sudha, a single mother in Calcutta, to come live with her and her husband, Sunil, in California, Sudha accepts her proposal to find solace in her sister like relationship. Divakaruni expertly juxtaposes the challenges, freedoms and crassness of modern-day America with the issues, both personal and cultural, each woman faces. Anju hopes to help Sudha start a new life in America, away from the stigma of divorce and single mother, and Sudha hopes to help her dear friend overcome the pain of losing her baby. But after coming to California, Sudha finds it difficult in getting adjusted to life in a different country. In India, her life was limited and oppressing. Nobody would accept a woman like her, who dared to break the rules and who wanted to live alone with her daughter. In California, though, she feels lost in a society where it seems that there are no rules- no rules
obvious to her at least. She misses everything about India. One day when it is raining outside in California, she finds herself “imprisoned in the apartment” (Divakaruni, *The Vine of Desire*, 36) and feels the air sticky and stale. As the rain has been continued for two weeks, she could not go outside the apartment and feels loneliness in this alien country:

“After a week, the sound of rain takes on relentlessness. It dredges up memories fetid as corpses. I had to press my face against the fogged-up window to keep in things it does no good to speak about. Nothing outside but concrete and a balding tree with dispirited needles for leaves”. (Divakaruni, *The Vine of Desire*, 37)

She also finds it difficult to cope with American culture and when she turns on TV to understand Americans, she turns it off quickly to see something vulgar on screen:

“She watches a weather report that states there’s a 70 percent chance of rain; a commercial for paper towels that features a giant male, a dirty floor, and a tiny, agitated woman; and the rerun of a game show. But when a plump woman who has correctly guessed the cost of a blender shrieks with delight and jumps up and down and throws her arms around the host to kiss him, she grimaces and switches it off.” (Divakaruni, *The Vine of Desire*, 37)
As Sudha feels unadjusted in the environment of alien country, she also finds natural objects unfamiliar so when she goes out with her friend, Lalit and touches the grass of that country she says;

"American grass smells different," Sudha says.

“In what way?...”

“It smells more male – you know, tough and fertilizer-fortified...if you stop taking care of it, it’ll die off right away. Indian grass looks more delicate – that startling new-green color – and yet it survives, in spite of droughts and cows and all the weeds that try to choke it.” (Divakaruni, The Vine of Desire, 175)

When Sudha goes to the American park to resist her loneliness, she finds it quite different from her Indian parks:

“A pretty park, clean, with new equipment. This must be a more affluent neighborhood. So neat, so bright, so much space between things. In Indian parks, people would jostle for space beneath the few banyan trees. The hot-gram and ice-cream sellers would sing-song their way between families with too many children. Piebald dogs would follow them, panting endlessly. Bus fumes, spicy pakoras, the too-sweet peaks of old woman’s hair candy. The odor of oleanders crushed under
small, excited shoes. Anju and I always returned home exhausted, sticky with surfeit.” (Divakaruni. The Vine of Desire, 81)

Divakaruni portrays American society in good and bad aspects both. On one side we see women much more free and emancipated than the ones in India, capable of working, living, have fun, doing things unimaginable for the Indians. On the other side, we also see loneliness and the incapacity of people to relate to each other, people living a superficial life, with no meaningful relationships or interests. Sudha also feels the same superficiality and ignorance in the park when she gives a smile to American ladies and they give no response to her:

“I venture a smile, they do not see me. Is it their ignorance of my world that renders me invisible, or their distrust? If I were in their place, I wouldn’t have smiled either at a brown woman in a sari and windbreaker.” (Divakaruni, The Vine of Desire, 81)

Divakaruni, being a storyteller of immigrants, especially women, who must face the contradictions between the country they left behind and the one that they must call home, draws a compelling contrast between the selflessness required of women in India and the sometimes bewildering freedoms offered in their adopted land. Sudha also feels this contradiction in American life and finds their culture different from her own:
“Especially since I came here. Everywhere I turn in America, they say. Live for yourself… I’m not sure what it means…There’s terrible pull to the idea of living for myself, and a terrible emptiness. I feel like a flyaway helium balloon – all the people I know are on the ground somewhere, but so far away and small, they hardly matter. Yet I know I can’t go back to the old way, living for others.’” (Divakaruni, The Vine of Desire, 177)

But when she leaves her cousin’s house with her daughter after getting a new job as a caretaker in a house and waits for Lupe, an employment consultant, in the street, she feels thankful to the impersonal customs of America:

“If this were India, at least half of them would know me. They’d ask me a thousand questions, offer to help, give advice, may be even escort me back home. Thank God for the impersonal customs of America.” (Divakaruni, The Vine of Desire, 204)

Anju, cousin of Sudha, who has been living in California after her marriage also finds of her arrival to this country as an “accident” (12) and discusses about her loneliness to her unborn child, Prem in the last month of her pregnancy:
“Let me tell you... who I used to be before the accident of America happened to me.”

“She told Prem about the old house, that white elephant of a mansion that had been in the Chatterjee family for generations; its crumbling marble façade, its peeling walls, the dark knots of its corridors, the brick terrace where she and Sudha went secretly at night to watch for falling stars to wish on...I miss it!... Sometimes I wish I hadn’t been in such a hurry to come to America.” (Divakaruni, The Vine of Desire, 12-13)

Anju also tells his unborn child about her temptation for books of American authors and longing for distant places:

“So in my teenage years, I read things like Anna Karenina and Sons and Lovers and The Great Gatsby and A Room of One’s Own... They filled me with dissatisfaction with my own life, and a longing for distant places. I believed that, if I could only get out of Calcutta to one of those exotic countries I read about, it would transform me. But transformation isn’t so easy, is it?” (Divakaruni, The Vine of Desire, 14)

Divakaruni’s women characters emerge as people of substance. They learn to make peace with the events life seems to have thrust on them, they try to
correct their mistakes and they grow as they hope for some kind of happy ending and closure.

The tormenting emotions that result when the characters choose to throw the baggage of their culture and create a new identity – the choices they make and the interaction they have with the immigrant community in America and through contact with their family – forces them to question their existence and morality and find answers.

When Anju joins a creative writing course in a college, one day she goes for coffee with the women from writing group. She feels uncomfortable in their company because she does not find herself familiar with their American talks:

“They speak of drugs in the inner city, latchkey children, candle-light vigils for victims of domestic violence. They plan marches, work on placards for demonstrations...Even their everyday talk...make her feel lonelier. Large chunks of herself will always be unintelligible to them...Only Sudha, she thinks unhappily, can ever understand these.” (Divakaruni, The Vine of Desire, 123-24)

This novel is a sensitive portrayal of the risks involved in breaking free from tradition and navigating the uncharted waters of freedom. Though the eyes of people caught in the clash of cultures, Divakaruni reveals the rewards and
the perils of breaking free from the past and the complicated, after contradictory emotions that shape the passage to independence in the future.

Anju’s husband Sunil also feels disturbed and alienated in the different country while he has been living in the country for a long time but he could not adjust himself in this culture and feels loneliness. So one day, when he is in his office he misses his days in India:

“He turns to his computer and lays his fingers on the slight, concave coolness of the keys… He walks to the window and cracks it open… He watches the grey sky as though for a sign. Is it at all like the sky under which he ran barefoot as a boy, yelling behind a cut-away kite? He must have done so. Don’t all boys? But it is hard to find a trace of it – that sky or that boyhood – in his face.” (Divakaruni, The Vine of Desire, 55)

Living in sin, indulging in an extramarital affair, the issue of personal space and the real meaning of love – the author hold up these concerns under a spotlight, concerns that have a completely different shade of meaning in an Indian context – and present the interpretation in a Western context. Her characters examine these concerns in the light of their evolving identities as American citizens and make choices that reveal a new emerging reality. Most Indian scriptures talk of the sublimation of desire as a goal but when the author encountered a new meaning in the western model where desire is
positive, charged with passion and ambition and often associated with goal-getters it fired her to explore it in “The Vine of Desire”, where Sudha falls in love with sister Anju’s husband and fights the feeling with every ounce of her might. Divakaruni says,

“I think desires are natural but we must examine them, she where they’re leading us and manage them accordingly. It is when they control us that they lead to problems. Ultimately, as our scriptures indicate, one needs to rise above desire. For me this means we do the things we do out of love, and not out of need.”

Divakaruni places the issue of culture straddling in perspective when she talks of values. “Values are constantly in flux. I think as I grow and understand more about life, my values shift – new things become more important and the same happens to my characters. Values that empower women have become increasingly important to me. Some things are the same everywhere though - Courage, integrity, truth, compassion. My characters struggle with trying to hold on to them. It is my struggle too.”

“The Vine of Desire” is peopled by Indian immigrants and – just as palpably – by their hopes and dreams. As one character says in the novel, “All immigrants are dreamers, but they’re practical about it. They
know what’s ok to dream about, and what isn’t.” (Divakaruni, The Vine of Desire, 181)

The feeling of uprooting, surely common to many immigrants all over the world, is very well described by Divakaruni. Trideep, a second-generation Indian American for whom Sudha works, brings his father to America from India because there is no one in India to look after him. But after some time, his father resists the efforts of his son and daughter-in-law, Myra, to get him to eat, to live a little; his way of protesting the way his son has treated him because he knows that his son is only doing what he does out of guilt. Now he wants to go back to his own country India as his son, Trideep tells to Sudha:

“He’s different now. When he first got here, he wanted to try everything...he loved ice-cream. We’d go to Baskin-Robbins every few days so he could try a new flavor. But now, whatever I bring him...he doesn’t even look. All he’ll say – in a painful stammer – is, Send me home, Deepu.” (Divakaruni, The Vine of Desire, 237)

At the end of the novel, Sudha decides to return to India, the country of her own, with Trideep’s father and her (Sudha’s) daughter, Dayita to live a full and happier life there and says to him:
“America isn’t the same country for everyone,…Things here didn’t work out the way I’d hoped. Going back with you would be a way for me to start over in a culture I understand the way I’ll never understand America.’ (Divakaruni, The Vine of Desire, 321)

Life is a combination of paradox. The road to satisfaction and self esteem is full of pot holes with no space to swerve. The quest for love – or in direct words – a canopy of emotional attachment and sympathy is fraught with endless problems that cry for solution before any further development. It can rightfully be inferred that life is not a bed of roses and an individual has to pass through the thorns in the quest of Rose. This is what ‘A Passing Shadow’ is all about.

The process of classifying factors for marital discord is difficult because the factors accentuating tension between husband and wife are interrelated and sequential in character. Broadly speaking, they may be divided into two categories. In the first category those factors can be put which emanate from the personality of the mates rendering them incompatible at the outset. This includes factors like temperamental incompatibility, sexual maladjustment and clash of expectations, wishes and desires. In the second category those factors can be put which are born out of economic, social and cultural constraints. Such problems look outstanding in cross-cultural and inter-racial
marriages and domestic turmoil, dissatisfaction and disagreement. These factors interrelate with each other thereby producing conflicting attitudes and inharmonious expectations. One particular situation, however, may involve a series of factors which aggravate marital discord. Blunted social conscience, evasion of obligations and complete disregard of responsibilities hasten disorganization.

The primary reason of fragility of the institution of marriage is, however, temperamental difference. Philosophy of life, personal behaviour patterns, emotional instability and care for personal happiness cause disruption in marriages. Erratic behaviour, emotional imbalance or psychological mismatching of the couples do not allow them to have perfect communion with each other, and erode their mutual trust and make the disturbed forms of communication obvious day by day. The excessive attachment of spouses to their parents (father or mother), siblings or even pets, renders them incapable of making adjustments to the physical and emotional needs of their spouses which leads to the ramification of the husband-wife relationship.

Closely related to temperamental and interpersonal behaviour patterns of life is the expression of personality problems in terms of conjugal relationship. The sexual maladjustment in the psychologically ill-matched couple occurs
due to the lack of readiness to accept the restrictions of social life. Apart
from the problems of impotency, frigidity or extra-marital relations, there
are certain background factors like physical and spiritual cruelty, habitual
drunkenness, insanity, absolute sterility or childlessness, sexual inadequacy
and excessive sex indulgence which are responsible for making a person
aloof, insecure or sadistic in his social or sexual experiences, causing
nervous disorders.

“\textbf{A Passing Shadow}” is a scalding book about dislocations, and alienations,
outsiders and losers, the tenuous and unconscious intersections of lives and
histories, and the consolations of storytelling. It is also a book about the
improbabilities of love. The shadows of life pass by and our efforts at
bringing them to the pen yield a manuscript that is fraught with our
frustration at our inability to hold on to them and simultaneously a feeling of
elation of having generated a fresh fantasy. Deceptively simple and hugely
entertaining, this book is a modern paranoid about life. This multi-layered
tale is truly timeless and universal. It is observation from life.

Conflict is a complex phenomenon and can be defined in different ways. It is
a situation in which people, groups or countries are involved in a serious
disagreement or argument. Conflict can be defined in simple words as a
general human reaction towards unjust ways, structure, norms and codes of
society or the dominant class. Thus, conflict is a general social form, and usually has a goal which is not circumscribed to the violent situations. This can be internal and external which is further being defined in the context of literature, here in “A Passing Shadow”.

Internal conflict exists when a character struggles with an ethical or emotional challenge. The best example of internal conflict is Macbeth’s speech before murdering Duncan:

“…Is this a dagger I perceive before me.” (Mac. 2.1.33-61)

The internal conflict, that a character experiences, will usually represent a question about morality within society as well as mankind. Internal conflict is an abstract category which manifests itself in the form of external conflict, that is, violent or non-violent protest or actions. Literature tends to portray more of internal conflict than external conflict. This is what “A Passing Shadow” all about.

Learning behind a mutilated past, a young woman sets out in search of her destiny. Agonies suffered at the hands of a rigid, psychic grand-father, a brush with nuns having rudimentary notions about morality, a broken affair with an unscrupulous man, an illegitimate pregnancy, she tries to put everything behind her as she travels to far off Kanpur-native of Uma – with never say, die spirit. With a heart ruthlessly frozen, with a mind now gone
awry, she tries to carve a place for herself in an alien city but dies during delivery of her baby girl Tara. She was living a carefree life in a nunnery until she meets Ramesh Gupta. Does she believe in the flamboyant claims of a deceitful man! But her longing to find true love and home makes the better of her. Her undue haste to get her cherished dream only furthers her repentance on introspection.

Fate, destiny and related uncertainties can disrupt or bring prosperity in any individuals’ life. An action or an event undertaken by an individual can have long lasting consequence that can disrupt or mature life. Ann Bhalla’s “A Passing Shadow” is a reflection on these two facts of life. Her novel set in the sprawling backdrop of Delhi, deals with the life of fate. Happiness, sadness, excitement, anxiety, sympathy and anger are emotions that sweep away a reader’s mind while going through this novel.

The constant tune of fate in the backdrop can be perceived throughout as well as on the anvil of this metaphorical prose. The intensity of fate is highlighted in ghettos of Som Prakash, Mala, Uma, Ramesh, Anand, Tara, Ashoke and others:

“The tale of nemesis did not make much of an impact upon me in my youth but now, in the winter of my life, it casts a brooding shadow over me that refuse to pass away. For I wonder, as I yet again reach the end
of the story, whether Nemesis laid her mantle on my shoulders when, as a young man, I placed a newborn babe upon the steps of an ancient church, thus setting in motion the events that followed.” (Bhalla, A Passing Shadow, Prelude)

The novel unfolds with the phrase:

“The longest day must have its close” (Bhalla, A Passing Shadow, 9)

And does the “CLOSE” not come dramatically by the portrayal of fructification of Anand’s attempt to commit suicide! For the proverbial family reputation.

An aura of longing which is a typical characteristic of a home, where the heart is continually recurring in the psyche of man, a passionate bond exists with the home, a sheltered grove for healing the wounds inflicted by time. Prominent emotional relationships are nourished at home which are nurtured by sensibility. The filial sensibility acts as a catalyst for the personalities of the siblings, and has a lasting influence. And hence the pivotal position of mother and father in the life of a person. Their place is not affected by time and place. This relationship is the only one which strengthens with time. The parental trait of protectiveness often leads the parents to cross their boundaries and zeal is more often the not the reason for family turmoil. Bhalla’s “A Passing Shadow” highlights a disaster looming large by the
insensibility of parents who have not been keen enough to discharge their responsibility.

The novel depicts a fine caricature of human psychology. The protagonist Ramesh encounters Mala—deprived of parental care and brought up in a convent-cum-missionary school. Her destiny brings her as a governess to the children of Ramesh. An adolescent Mala is attracted towards elderly Ramesh. He could not suppress his desire to feast on forbidden fruit and indulges himself freely without having a tinge of love in his heart for her, taking her as a time-pass entertainment and finally suggests her to forget everything when he comes to know about her conception but Mala shows her reluctance for abortion. Uma, wife of the protagonist Ramesh, being of the same gender, condescends to understand her situation. She proposes to help her in getting married to the person she loved, but Mala does not disclose the name of the lover. Then Uma makes arrangements to send Mala to her mother Bimla Bhushan, who runs a home for the helpless and downtrodden women. Mala gives birth to a baby girl and dies. The child, named Tara by the nurses, is brought up by Mrs. Bimla Bhushan, the mother of Uma. But after the sudden demise of Bimla Bhushan, at the age of five, Tara is sent to Uma who admits Mala to her affections and perhaps may do so for her as well which she apparently does. Ramesh perceives the little
child as a problem. He is surprised to see the blue eyes of the child, and concludes that she is not his daughter as she does not resemble either Mala or Ramesh himself. He hates the child. He is much surprised that:

“...A wild hope surged in his breast that Mala had been meeting someone else besides him but it dies away just as quickly. He knew it had not been possible for so many reasons, chief among them that she had been too besotted with him to look at another man.” (Bhalla, A Passing Shadow, 106)

A parallel character Somnath Prakash lives in Springfield, Virginia, who prays in his daily devotions for the well being of the new born babe whom he betrayed on the steps of an ancient Church. Somnath closets his secret of an earlier married life and a babe; and enters into a marital relationship with a second one. However, this secret is weighed down by sadness. His guilty conscience followed him even to all vibrant and carefree Virginia:

“With a helpless feeling of sad resignation, he whispered a last prayer for the child he had abandoned twenty one years ago on a warm summer’s day at dawn. It was a short prayer, one that he said everyday of his life since then. He asked God to take care of her wherever she was and begged forgiveness for what he had done.” (Bhalla, A Passing Shadow, 83)
The male characters have been depicted as compassionless fathers in their children. The miniscule difference between them is that Somnath Prakash though opposes to her marriage with a foreigner detested the idea of keeping his daughter unmarried because of his adamancy. Full of remorse, he decides that his interventions would only serve to ruin the course of his daughter’s life. And thence, he embarks on the path of new moorings. Love and attachment of the children with their parent chill out with the satisfaction of their needs. Children expect their parents to be respectable and full of decency as prime psychological need. The filial bond ruptures with the departure of dignity and sensibility in parents is shown well in this oeuvre. It is at such a moment, when Ramesh notices his seventeen year old son’s eyes linger on his illegitimate child Tara’s face. He too casts a quick look at the girl, and then looks again and soliloquizes:

“Tara had no inherited any of the physical attributes from either of her parents… ‘Where did she get those eyes from?’… But whoever was responsible for the refinement of her features was to be thanked, for no one, looking at her, could trace the faintest resemblance back to him…”

(Bhalla, A Passing Shadow, 132-133)

The male characters of this novel are insensible but this deficiency is partially made up for with the female characters brimming with love,
affection and sincerity towards their off-springs. For example, Bimla Bhushan, mother of Uma, Uma herself, Farida, the maid and even Mala have never been insensible towards the emotional needs of the children. Tara feels quite confident in the loving guardianship of Mrs. Bimla Bhushan, and Uma let her rise with self esteem and never let her feel like a destitute. Dislikes for Ramesh apart, Tara harbours a deep respect for Uma whose affections have never let her feel the dearth of a mother. The character of Ramesh and Uma and the feelings of Tara for them have been definitively etched in the undernoted lines:

“Though the horn in thy flower pricked me,

O Beauty, I am grateful.” (Tagore 1926)

It is Uma’s compassionate nature that gives Tara the bliss of growing up in the family despite the indifference of Ramesh. All the amenities due to a member of the family protection and good education for better prospects are given to her without restrain. Ramesh never experiences a sense of belongingness to Tara as Uma does. This is the cause of vanity in Tara. The negative feelings of Ramesh adversely affect her relationship with him. She could never like him. Bimla Bhushan was the first impression of love in her life as after her death she feels no unifying force in the family. With the onset of her new “mature” status, a loosening up occurs in Tara’s mind. She
has always been a compliant little girl, doing as she was told and abiding by the rules, first in Bimla’s house and then in Uma’s. But now a feeling of self identity, a spark of rebellion ignited in her heart and mind, waiting for an opportunity to be released:

“Partly because she had become more aware of herself and partly because she was tired of her non-status in the Gupta household she was ready to burst out of the confines that had always roped her in.”

(Bhalla, A Passing Shadow, 134)

Later, the callous behaviour of Somnath Prakash leads to disaster in Shanti Niwas. He harbours a deep sense of regret and feels that providence is playing a bad game with him with nemesis casting a brooding shadow over him that refuses to go into oblivion. The writer has delved at length on complex nature of man. The illegal requisite of love by the protagonist causes enough damage to many of life. A furtive action, reaction and inaction of two men, Somnath and Ramesh, and the far reaching consequences that are inflicted on their respective families as a result, are well told as an unpleasant shadow forever:

The mother educates her daughter in the art of never displeasing the in-laws and the husband. A daughter’s failure to perform such duties would bring
shame on her upbringing and the fault would be laid at mother’s door. Sudha Mazumdar elaborates in her book “Memoirs of an Indian Woman”:

“The vocation of every girl was to be a wife and mother, and the ideal held up for her future life was ‘seva’, service to others… . It was the pride and privilege of a bride to serve, but if she failed, her parents were blamed for her shortcomings, and the mother bore the slur of having failed in her duty towards her daughter.” (28)

Marital discord is neither desirable nor desired but conflict in married life is inevitable. It is perhaps as old as the institution of marriage itself, although it has varied in degree from time to time and from person to person. In the pre-industrial era, men and women who came together in marriage shared a great deal in terms of cultural values, mutual commitment, trust and faith. They learnt to live together, love each other and provide an atmosphere congenial to their living. They made new adjustments as the need arose. The shared values and attitudes subordinated the interests of the individuals to the ideals which resulted in the harmonious relationship of the family. Their conjugal love entailed constant togetherness, intimate understanding and mutual respect. They fulfilled their complementary, instrumental and expressive needs and gratified their ego and emotional bond, apart from their sexual desire. There were certain bickering, tensions and maladjustments in their
marital relationship too, which used to disorganize their family. But the moral and religious convictions, social controls of the family, economic dependence and the fear of social and parental disapproval kept them together, as wrote Khurana in “Marital Discord”:

“However ill-matched they were. Outwardly, they maintained the semblance of a happy family life, though inwardly they were maladjusted and tense.” (1)

Ditto in the case of Uma and Ramesh. These two individuals are living under the same roof in the grab of married life. They are keeping the cloak of marriage for the sake of the society. Communication between them is restricted strictly to the performance of some physical or social urgency. But this particular feature at times plays a prominent role in generating a married discord:

“Do you want me to stay with you?

Her tome implied that she hoped he did not.

No, he said again, a hint of impatience in his voice.

I’m fine by myself. I am sure you have things to do inside.” (Bhalla, a Passing Shadow, 12)

Here starts an inapt drama with an extra marital affair involving the domestic help. An excellent oeuvre of Ann Bhalla which guides the reader
by the hand, from past to present, to come to understand the Indian plight and offers his solution out. The conclusion reads: A brush of shoulder with “The Fate,” bewilders the partners while simultaneously disrupting the mentality and attitude of related people. Despite the blazing knowledge about her husband’s affair with the domestic help, Uma remarkably demonstrates a unique caliber of assimilation by showing her concern for his welfare:

“Uma draped a napkin under his chin… Now, don’t be a bad boy. You know this is what the doctor said you should eat for dinner, something light and non spicy. How will you get strong if you don’t follow his orders?” (Bhalla, A Passing Shadow, 30)

Her voice is reprimanding like he had turned into naughty childhood. And once again this irritates him, and he utters:

“I wish you’d stop treating me like a two-year old.” (Bhalla, A Passing Shadow, 30)

As Uma disregarding his little outburst, seats herself by his side and watches him as a mother keeps an eye over a child. Though the whirlwind of circumstances engulfs the house making Uma feels like she has been wandering in some alien place, she tries her best to foot forward to assimilate this situation, because marital bond tells us to stay forever
together especially when it comes to show things to the society or else they would feel alienated in their own country:

“What the Lord has thus ordained,

Let man not put asunder” (Bible: Psalms)

Indian society postulates that one should find all possible means to maintain the energy of their marital bond till the end of their lives. Uma too has been maintaining the same stance. She had taken the bold step with Tara but the eventual revelation howsoever crude could not turn her away from the relationship. Consequently, since his return from the hospital, though she sleeps in the adjacent room instead of the bedroom they shared for almost thirty years, but the irony to be noticed here is that:

“As a slave to her conscience, however, she kept both the room doors open in case he needed help in the night.” (Bhalla, A Passing Shadow, 31)

Here Uma’s concern for Ramesh is considerable and wrapped in Indian ethos. Ramesh too cares for Uma even after the storm. He often longs to call out to her. That is why in a restless night with his mind mulling over his memories, he promises to be the wakeful one. He wishes to stay with Uma but the weary look on her face makes him abandon the though and replies briefly on a query of Uma:
“Can I get you anything else?... He mouthed a terse ‘no thanks’ ‘Good night’ then she said equally brief.” (Bhalla, A Passing Shadow, 32)

Ramesh and Uma could not get uprooted from their roots despite the storm owning to their Indian moorings, where marriage is a union of lifetime and even beyond. However, it’s important to know that, no matter bleak things might seem, it’s possible to revitalize a marriage wounded by infidelity. It’s not easy- there is no quick-fix but it is possible and is exactly reflected by Uma’s behaviour towards her husband. True that Ramesh has an extra marital affair but he does not charge into this affair, it is the girl Mala who initiates this unsavoury relationship. When Uma and his children are away to Uma’s native, Ramesh is fine with their absence for a week but there after, he starts missing his family and especially his wife:

“He felt suddenly lonely and wished that his wife and children around.”
(Bhalla, A Passing Shadow, 40)

Ramesh knows he will miss his family that is why he strongly opposes the idea of Uma of going to her parents’ abode for her delivery. But woman like, she refuses to listen and says:

“I am going, why do you keep objecting? It’s the custom and I’d like to follow it for a change. Besides, I feel so pampered when I’m there.”
(Bhalla, A Passing Shadow, 33)
Bhalla seems to suggest here that the words ‘I’m there’ are sounding like “unlike here”. And bitten off but they hangs, like invisible darts, suspends in space. That simply shows the love and nostalgia for ones native or mother land between that can never be replaced. Thence Uma is hurried for going to her mother. Usually Uma takes care of where women are concerned, but this time she is quit assured because she thinks:

“…In this case I know I have nothing to worry about because she’s just not your type…” (Bhalla, A Passing Shadow, 36)

What do you mean? … What’s my type?

Someone more sophisticated like me, perhaps…” (Bhalla, A Passing Shadow, 36)

Uma is pretending to own an identity and class that could not be disturbed by anyone. Uma is all settled with her identity which can be sensed at one more place when a “go away gift” is brought by Ramesh for Mala; Uma has briefly scrutinized the gift, and remarks:

“It was pretty enough, but not to her taste, and slid it back into its carrier bag.’ (Bhalla, A Passing Shadow, 38)

The evidence Uma is maintaining a class and doesn’t wish to come out of the shell she has created for herself. Finally, after a lot of insistence by Ramesh, Uma has words with Mother Clair and sends Mala back to nunnery
on full salary for next three months. Later the same day, Ramesh drops Uma and family at the railway station:

“It was a Friday in early August, he remembered, a wild wet day of monsoon rain that made his trip home a difficult one.” (Bhalla, A Passing Shadow, 39)

The pain of Ramesh is well articulated in these words, as is the day which takes away the peace of Ramesh’s life and sends him into a void of no return. But he has to survive to prove that he is the fittest. Every dark cloud has but a silver lining. The occurrences of various events of Ramesh’s life reveal the shadow of fate on him and in deciding a future for his children.

A man may howsoever be successful in assimilating the alien culture; his conscience always acts as a chariot for his thought to drive him home. After a few days of his family departure, the peace and quiet of the house begins to jar on his nerves. His days are busy enough but the evenings are hard to pass. After one such evening, he returns home slightly tipsy with an unusual amount of alcohol. He fumbles for a moment with the key then enters the home. He is leading to the master bedroom and sees the light under its door. He tiptoes to the room to catch the burglar. But much to his surprise he finds Mala:
“…Mala! What are you doing here so late in noight? … You know madam is not at home. What possessed you to do this insane thing?

This reluctance towards her shows Ramesh’s concern about his wife. He is in no mood to have an ephemeral with Mala. But her blunt answer:

“I came to see you sir. I just couldn’t stand it, being away from you for so long.” (Bhalla, A Passing Shadow, 42)

The ephemeral between Mala and Ramesh works like fireworks and decides the destiny of his children so far. But Mala is hurt to the hilt with ‘here today, gone tomorrow’ attitude of Ramesh when her pregnancy is detected. This could be understood well by Arendt’s words in “The Human Condition”:

“Without being bound to the fulfillment of promises, one would never be able keep ones identity; one would be condemned to wander helplessly and without direction in the darkness of each person’s lonely heart, caught in its contradictions and equivocal ties – a darkness which only the light shed over the public realm through the presence of others, who confirm the identity between the one who promises and the one who fulfils, may dispel.” (287)

The characters have been etched and sketched in a truly lifelike manner and make it doubly impossible to put the novel down until the last page. The
reader is engulfed in a wave of sympathy for the central character, Tara, as her life is nothing less than a journey through a valley of trials and tribulations.

Ramesh, as the master of ‘Shanti Niwas’, never wants Tara to join them in his house on the ground of child’s illegitimacy and his own fears coming forth as he is the sole culprit of all the female characters directly or indirectly in the story. He says to his wife Uma:

“Her mother was a charity case. Let the child follow in the same footsteps…Uma, so do try and be reasonable.” (Bhalla, A Passing Shadow, 109)

But Uma is firm enough to keep his mother’s wish of not sending the child to any orphanage. She replies looking at her husband defiantly:

“Let me have my say now, Ramesh… whether you like it or not she’s going to stay here.” (Bhalla, A Passing Shadow, 110)

Uma’s firmness resembles that of Viswamitra’s to send Trishanku to paradise. All this chipping and chopping throws the child into a dilemma as to where to go, what to do, who I am, from where did I come? What is my identity? These questions of nativity makes her alienated enough even in the place she born and brought up till date. And this feeling of alienation carries her to her future abode.
The place where Tara is destined to stay for rest of her life is also suffering with a tense environment. Ramesh is ready to take care of all the funds which will be required to send the girl into an orphanage and suggests his wife:

“It’s not the matter of finances. We don’t know anything about her mother’s background. Or her father’s. He had added, almost as an afterthought.” (Bhalla, A Passing Shadow, 110)

But Uma feels responsible for what happens to Mala. She says:

“…we sent her back to the convent when I went to Kanpur for Anil’s delivery. If she had stayed here, she would not have met the man who got her pregnant and if that had not happened, she would not have died.” (Bhalla, A Passing Shadow, 110)

But Ramesh still is in no mood of changing his views about Tara and answers:

“That still does not make us responsible for the child…” (Bhalla, APS, 110)

As quoted by Patnaik in “Indian Mythology”:

“Peace was restored and a compromise reached when the gods agreed to let Trishanku hang his head downwards at constellation in the starry sky.” (134)
In same way matter of bringing the child home gets settled by Ramesh’s words:

“…Do as you wish. But be sure to keep her as much as possible out of my sight.” (Bhalla, A Passing Shadow, 111)

Ultimately, there is no place for Tara where she wants to live – ‘the place of her birth’, she utters stubbornly to Sarla:

“I like living here in this house.” (Bhalla, A Passing Shadow, 111)

But she can’t live there because her care-taker and guardian Mrs. Bimla Bhushan is no more to take care of her, even though she insists Sarla aunty to stay there by saying:

“It’s my home. Dadi ma always used to say that.” (Bhalla, APS, 98)

After hearing these words Sarla says:

“Well Dadima is dead now and this house is going to be sold. So you can’t live here any longer.” (Bhalla, A Passing Shadow, 98)

Now it can easily be noticed that Tara is nowhere desired they had all accepted and tolerated her because of Bimla and now that she is no longer with them, there is no pertinent reason to carry on doing so. Providence, it seems, has taken a dirty laugh on her by directing her destiny to the place and house from where her mother was thrown out.
The situation becomes worst when she reaches Shanti Niwas and receives cold and rude welcome from the master of the house, Ramesh. Ramesh throws the child a piercing look that makes her quake inwardly. When being asked by his wife about why he is staring at the girl and frightening her. He doesn’t reply but continues his intense scrutiny of the child’s face. Even Uma’s exasperated look could not stop him scrutinizing Tara’s features specially eyes. Ramesh himself starts doubting about Tara’s identity. His eyes still fix on Tara, he is thinking:

“Greenish eyes. Where did those come from? A wild hope surged in his breast that Mala had been meeting someone else besides him.” (Bhalla, A Passing Shadow, 106)

How can he think like this because he knows well that she has been too besotted with him to look at another man? But his doubt about Tara’s identity is quite visible by stating such words in stiff and unnatural sound:

“No she does not look like Mala at all.” (Bhalla, A Passing Shadow, 107)

Ramesh’s behaviour towards the child is the result of his self pride, and the category in which he keeps himself can be aptly understood by the “Social Identity Theory” of Henri Tajfel and John C. Turner. Their theory focuses mainly on the role of self-categorization and attempts to show how a simple
sense of distinctiveness can lead people to act in a discriminating way. Moreover, in “Social Identity Theory”, Cote and Levine shows that:

“Merely crafting cognitive distinction between in – and out – groups can lead to subtle effects on people’s evaluations of others.” (20)

Consequently, when Uma forces Ramesh to welcome Tara he says in a forced convivial voice:

“Hello Tara.” (Bhalla, A Passing Shadow, 107)

His voice does not fool anyone, especially the child addresses. Man’s basic vice, the source of all his evils, is the act of not focusing his mind, the suspension of his consciousness, which is not blindness, but the refusal to see, not ignorance, but the refusal to know. Irrationality is the rejection of man’s means of survival and, therefore, a commitment to a course of blind deist. At the spur of the moment, Tara is sure it will not be easy for her assimilate comfortably in this new place. And suddenly homesickness dawns on her – she starts missing her old place where she was so comfortably living with Dadima and becomes more upset as even that place doesn’t belong to her anymore. Tara has not articulated a single word since her entrance in the house. She badly seeks her comfort of Kanta’s familiar homely presence in all the opulence surrounding her, and specially after her encounter with the unfriendly master of the house. But Kanta has been told
to settle herself into the allotted to her in the servant quarter. She has been assigned the tasks of assisting Sita in the kitchen and act as an Ayah for the children. No option left for Tara but to make herself comfortable in the company of Uma aunty. After analyzing so many things about Tara’s belonging, it can be concluded that, it is not only she but no one else knows about her real nativity. As in Thomas Hardy’s “The Return of the Native”, the tragedy is due largely to the weakness and faults of the characters themselves and to the extent:

“…character is fate”

As soon as Kanta and the child Tara arrive at Shanti Niwas, they are amazed at the prosperity of the place. It is a huge house with big Iron Gate:

“…they…stood with their mouths open staring up at the great big house…” (Bhalla, A Passing Shadow, 105)

The hugeness of the house has started luring Tara in some way or the other. From here starts her journey to perfect a drive for assimilation of herself with the new environs. Tara pensiveness is justified. The drive for assimilation may prove fatal at times with the person losing his innate character and identity.

In “A Passing Shadow”, Bhalla explores the complex world of human relationships while firmly grounding her characters in the social and
personal realities of her times. Through her protagonists and their yearnings, love, laughter, tears, trials and tribulations, the author subtly brings alive the complicated emotional sentiments, while at the same time endeavouring to deliver a powerful social message. So light is her touch that her protagonists seem to be at times at odds with themselves but, for the very reason, more human. As in the following extract in which Tara is being asked to accompany Anita and she is not having any other choice except saying yes:

“Can’t you sacrifice that one year in return for almost fifteen years that you have lived here? Remember you wouldn’t have been at this point in your life, looking for a job and ready to get a flat of your own, if we had not first educated you. Is it really too much to ask?” (Bhall a, A Passing Shadow, 214)

Pangs of illegitimacy; shared goals of the welfare of family; and the non-violent struggle of the relationships, are deftly interwoven in Bhalla’s ‘A Passing Shadow’. It is starting to note how topical these issues are even in the city like Delhi of our times and yet how important the emotions are in this materialistic scenario. Certainly the innocent idealism seems rather anachronistic today, but at the same time, very appealing.

Anand is an intelligent and idealistic, yet weak young man who has grown up hating his father’s attitude towards the “so called Orphan” Tara and
adherence to the formalities of a typical rich family with full bodied background. He falls in love with Tara who is beautiful and intelligent but without a full bodied background or more appropriately, without a legal background. Even her father’s way of criticizing Tara’s background could not detract Anand from his logical and down-to-earth approach to life.

Denied love at home and stifled by his father, Anand seeks love and comfort. His quest for a respite leads him to the modest and courteous Tara. When his father refuses to accept Tara, Anand plans to call it a day in his paternal home and search for a haven where he could submit himself to the warmth exuded by Tara’s heart. That is why when he hears Tara is ready to go to London to assist her sister he writes to Tara:

“Darling, have you taken leave of your senses? Don’t you know that their aim is to separate us again? Tell them that you have been changed your mind and won’t go.” (Bhalla, A Passing Shadow, 214)

But Tara could not go back on her word and tearfully writes back to Anand that she feels obligated to do what Uma asks. Here Tara’s situation is more alike fishes. Langston Donna in “American Indian Women’s Activism” states about a movement which is aptly suitable for Tara. In general:

“The ability to move about the stream environment is important to the survival and reproduction of fishes. Because, the scale and pattern of
fish movement varies widely among species, it is important to investigate the species and their needs before analyzing a culvert for fish passage. It is also important to reconsider concepts about limited movements of juvenile and resident stream fishes. It may not be safe to assume that juvenile fish only require downstream passage or that resident stream fish’s survival is solely dependent on a restricted home range.” (117)

Love demands sacrifice and Anand has prepared himself mentally to undergo the ordeal. He settles everything else for Tara and himself, from managing return tickets for Tara from London to Delhi and the rent for next month by his own earning. Anand, by doing a job as succeeds in garnering a position in the society for himself. His identity now does not require the crutches of his father’s name. The gravity of roots is more potent than any other bond. Even a vagabond has a safe corner in his heart for his roots - a shade or a canopy where he can shelter in a rainy or tumultuous season. This despite all adaptation and assimilation – successful or not – of an alien culture, Anand’s character is a reflection of the saying – The right thing to do is to dare to do the right at any cost.

Every man is a consumer and ought to be a producer. Unable to comprehend the degree of his Son’s affinity for Tara, Ramesh throws all caution to the
dogs as he is compelled by the circumstances to blurt out his dark truth to his son – the truth of Ramesh – Mala and Tara.

Anand stands transfixed for a moment but instantaneously comes round and concludes that his father has cooked-up the story to ignite a flame of hatred in him for Tara and success may ultimately crown his father by dissuading Anand from going further in this relationship. But the truth always triumphs. The roller coaster ride of Anand’s life has made him accepts failure as an inseparable part of his life. He decides:

“They could stay in the hotel until he could find a place for them to move to…” (Bhalla, A Passing Shadow, 218)

The desire for justice is one that people tend to be unwilling to compromise; assertions of injustice often lead to intractable conflicts. An individual’s sense of justice is connected to the norms, rights, and entitlements that are thought to underlie decent human treatment. If there is a perceived discrepancy between what people obtain, what they want, and what they believe they are entitled for, and their belief regarding their entitlements, the outcome is in the form of an outcry-unfair. When people believe that they have been treated unfairly, they may try to “get even” or challenge those who have treated them unjustly. Indeed, a sense of injustice often motivates
retaliation. An extract from the last letter of Anand to Tara purges the feelings of heartfelt love for Tara and a reply to his father:

“...Believe me it is not something that easy to take my own life and leave you to face yours alone... I am under oath not to reveal but I refused where you are concerned. I don’t want you to go through life thinking and wondering why, why, why, why did I cause you so much pain. The heartbreaking fact of the matter is, Tara darling, that my father is also your father.” (Bhalla, A Passing Shadow, 332)

Often in a fit of rage or mounting frustration, individuals are beguiled with a dark curtain placed on their eye of decision. The emotional fireworks get out of control. To give vent to a plethora of feelings which the heart finds incapable of expressing, the individual is finally and ultimately driven to suicide.

Before concluding, the best suited words for the book – a must read for all the hardcore sentimental and emotional readers. With its focus on the family bonds and strong social overtones, ‘A Passing Shadow’ will be of interest to the general reader, as well as students and scholars of literature.

“Life is like a pendulum which swings between smile and tear.”

This line is apt here; the prelude and the postlude mentioned in the novel shows the same notion.
Works cited


