CHAPTER - V

WORKS OF MIGRANT ASIAN AMERICAN WRITERS
WORKS OF MIGRANT ASIAN AMERICAN WRITERS

Immigrant literature is usually written by immigrants and by second or third generation Americans. Often biographical in nature, these narratives reflect the experience of immigration and acculturation and the associated uneasiness of the process.

The anxiety that immigrant literature exposes is a combination of determination, success, loneliness and abandonment. Desires of attachment to the homeland juxtaposed to the uncertainties surrounding assimilation assert themselves as underlying conflicts. Added to these struggles are issues of self-identity, that stem from the intricacies of cultural adaptation.

Tension in Immigrant literature centres on association with the newland, identification of the Self and the Other, and language acquisition. First, the land itself offers a powerful blend of freedom and fear. It also explores the idea of Self and the Other. The writings seek to affirm the new Immigrant Self while simultaneously using the Other to restructure the immigrants new identity.

When people immigrate, they strive to give up that which they were in order to become the Other, that which they desire to be. The former self remains part of the immigrants' psychological structure. The juxtaposition of these characters reflect the heroic illusion and the difficult reality of immigrant life.
The relationships of characters and narrators, to the physical land, the development of the Self and the Other and the acquisition of language appears as central themes in Immigrant Literature.¹

**Asian American Literature**

The United States has many diverse ethnic groups with their own distinct culture, heritage and history. Americans of Asian descent, often referred to as Asian Americans, have ancestral ties to a number of different Asian countries. Which are as diverse as Cambodia, China, India, Indonesia, Japan, Korea, Laos, Pakistan, the Philippines, Thailand and Vietnam. More than 11.9 million people of Asian descent live in the United States. As a result they are the country's third largest minority group, after African Americans and Latino Americans. The history of Asian immigrants in America spans more than 200 years. In this long history of life in the United States Asians have faced numerous challenges and hurdles in their desire to achieve the American Dream. These people feared competition for jobs and, in some cases, even competition in social relationships, until 1965 when all restrictions against Asian immigrants were lifted.²

The number of immigrants increased drastically in the next few years that it was recorded by the United States Census of 2000 that 4.5 percent of the total United States population is of Asian descent or Asian in combination
with other races. As their numbers increased they became less strangers to the American public and Asian American Literature became an exciting arena for artistic creativity.

Asian American writing encompasses many categories ranging from fiction to non-fiction, prose to poetry, adult literature to children’s literature and novels and stories to plays and dramas. Asian American Literature, as a phrase was coined in the 1960s and 1970s and the Asian American Movement was started to claim a space in America for people of Asian descent. They showed greater participation in politics and also tried to capture public attention through literature and the arts. “As people living in the United States, Asian Americans needed a literature that described their lives and feelings”.  

Literature and arts are vehicles for expression and creativity modes of demonstrating that Asian Americans have their own cultural identity and artistic sensibility. In carving out a space for Asian American literature and Asian American arts, these activist pioneers did not seek the marginalization and isolation of Asian American literature. Rather, they argued that Asian American literature was also part of American literature, an integral part of the rich heritage of the United Stated and owing to their efforts the University-San Francisco State University and the University of California, Berkeley, in the 1960s and 1970s agreed to offer courses that taught about Asians in the United States.
Jeffery Paul Chan, one of those who pushed for Asian American, recalls that at San Francisco State University, campus officials suggested that courses on Asian American Literature could be taught. Chan and his fellow activists had to "scramble" around and find some Asian American Literature.⁵

Browsing in libraries and foraging in bookstores, they discovered books, diaries, stories, poetry and other works written by Asian Americans. They learned that there had been earlier pioneering writers who had developed an Asian American consciousness, an awareness that verified that there were Asians living in America.

In 1974, when Lawson Inada, Frank Chin and Shawn Wong, Chan edited an anthology with an unusual title, Aiiiiiiii! An Anthology of Asian American Writers⁶ they were screaming to attract notice from the public to recognize that there was a body of writing called Asian American Literature with abundant creative work that was drawn from the lives and experiences of Asian Americans. They hoped to promote understanding of Asians in the United States and to empower their communities. They sought to project a positive image of Asian Americans by destroying stereotypes.⁷ They did not want Asian Americans to be seen as always speaking broken English with broken foreign accents. Nor did they want the Asian Americans to be viewed as the perennial enemy soldiers, evil war lords and criminal gangsters, as were
projected in novels, Hollywood movies and television programmes. In short, they were concerned about the issue of representation, or how Asian Americans were depicted in media, literature and popular culture. Some activists believed that Asian American Literature should be a mirror of the community and serve its people hence there was a positive portrayal of Asian American Community and creative and artistic literature was encouraged.\(^8\)

Whitman's 'Passage to India' affords an early port of entry. His 'gardens of Asia' or, in another enduring phrase from the poem 'myths asiatic', might well provide headings for the fictions of Asia within all Euro Americans literary and popular culture. It was Frank Chin's Aiiiiiiiiii! An Anthology of Asian American writers in 1974, and its successors The Big Aiiiiiiiiii! An Anthology of Chinese American and Japanese American Literature in 1991, that fiction, memoir, poetry, essay and drama, bore witness to the new order of things. This was to be a literary regime possessed, repossessed, of its own peopling, timeline, diversity of idiom and origins, Asian's American rather than American's Asia, or yet more accurately, that of Asian America.\(^9\)

The 'Aiiiiiiiiii' of both titles, was meant as a rebuff to the assumption of a missing literature, along with one - dimensionality of voice routinely attributed to Asian in fiction, screen, radio and comic books. The introduction carried all the tone of embattlement, the call to rally.
The Asian Americans are here presented as elegant or repulsive, angry and bitter, militantly anti-white, not out of any sense of perversity or revenge but of honesty. American's dishonesty and its racist white supremacy passed off as love and acceptance - has kept seven generations of Asian American off the air, off the streets, and praised us for being Astatically no-show. A lot of it is lost forever. But from the few decades of writing we have recovered from seven generations it is clear we have a lot of elegant, angry and bitter life to be shown. We are showing off. If the reader is shocked, it is due to his own ignorance of Asian America. We're not new here Aiiieeeeee!!

Asian American Novel

The umbrella term "Asian American Novel" designates writing by people of national orgins in countries like China, Japan, Korea, the Philippines, India, Singapore, Vietnam and Cambodia who either were born in or immigrated to the United States. The expression “Asian American” popularised in the 1960s promotes political solidarity and cultural recognition for Asian Americans and stresses shared experiences of Asian immigrants in the United States. The narratives of Asian-American writers creatively engage the experience of being of Asian descant in the U.S. while dealing with the historical, linguistic and ethnic specificities of each nationality. Early works tended to focus on stories of immigration and questions of assimilation and the "between worlds" situation. They also tended to challenge American perceptions of Asians; analyze what constitutes an "Asian" or "American"
identity; examine language, generational conflicts and relationships, racism
and social class, and remember national history and claim the immigrants
place in the history of America, among other concerns. Later the theses
varied from interethnic relationship, to assimilation, biraciality, bilingualism,
explore the question of authenticity and develops issues of gender and
sexuality. 11

**Chinese - American Novels**

The beginnings of Chinese - American function are traced back to Edith and
Winnifred Eaton, daughters of a British father and Chinese mother, who
settled first in Canada and then in the U.S. under pseudonyms sounding as
Chinese and Japanese names (Sui Sin Far and Oto no Watnna) and published
numerous short stories.

Stories of immigration and strategies of assimilation, as well as generational
and cultural conflicts are the themes of Amy Tan's The Joy Luck Club and
the kitchen God's Wife. Chuang Hua's Crossings is an experimental novel of
high modernism whose protagonist attempts to come to terms with her racial
affiliations.

**Filipino - American Novels**

American colonization of the Philippines at the end of the 19th century led to
the immigration of migrant workers and student scholars, man of whom
settled permanently and began to creatively engage the cultural consequences of the Filipino's ambivalent relationship with America. In general, three generations of writers may be identified; the pioneering generation of both the Filipino novel in English and Filipino-American writing, whose works dealt with the situation of early Filipino immigrants: the second, more politically conscious group who immigrated in the 1960s-70s, many of whom were exiles from the Marcos regime; and the new generation that arose in the 1990s, mostly second generation children whose stimulating writing expands existing structural and thematic approaches. The most important writers of the first generation include Bienvenido Santos whose novels The Man Who Thought He looked like Robert Taylor (1983) and What The Hell For You Left Your Heart in San Francisco (1989) foreground the lonely lives of Filipino expatriates in the United States and their longing for their homeland, and N.V.M. Gonzalez, who wrote both in the Philippines and in the United States novels like The Season of Grace (1954) and the Bamboo Dancers (1961) which explore Filipino country life with nostalgia, as well as the difficulties of returning home.

Linda Ty-Casper is one of the central though little recognised writer of the second generation, and her works helped shape many of the works of her contemporaries. In novels like The Peninsulars (1964), The Three Cornered Sun (1979), Fortress in the Plaza (1985), Wings of Stone (1986), and
Awaiting Trespass (1989), she explores the Filipino history of successive colonizations, as well as the period of Marcos' dictatorship. Several of her novels could not be published in the Philippines because they were set during the martial law years.

The third group of writers explore the relationship of second-generation children with the contradiction of America and nuance the representation of immigration. Peter Bacho's award-winning Cebu (1991) presents a Filipino-American priest whose return to the Philippines shatters his complacency about his ideas of home and religious commitment. The protagonist of Nelsons Run (2002) subverts accepted ideas about American neocolonialism in the Philippines.

**Japanese American Novels**

Japanese American narratives must be read in the context of the two historical events that gave the community its shape: the arrival in the first two decades of the 20th century of tens of thousands of Japanese "picture brides" leading to the birth of a large generation of Americans of Japanese descent and the establishment of flourishing communities and the internment of Japanese American during World War II. Novels like Yoshika Uchidas Picture Bride (1987), Milton Murayamas Five Year on a Rock (1994) based on his mother's life and Yoji Yamapuchi's Face of a Stranger
(1995) all deal with the lives of women who crossed the sea to marry men they had not met and to raise American children.

Other writers have widened the themes and approaches to narrative. Cynthia Kadowatas novels The Floating World (1989) and in the Heart of the Valley of Love (1992) expand the representation of Japanese American characters and themes. Both are travel narratives that repeatedly challenge the stereotype of Japanese American and their families, as well as the themes traditionally attributed to Asian American writers. Lois-Ann Yamanaka's novels feature characters growing up in Hawaii's multicultural setting. In Wide Meat and The Bully Burgers (1996), Blu's Hanging (1997) and Heads by Harry (1999), she skilfully uses the child's perspective to explore the Hawaiian experience with insightful humour, using the local experience.

*Korean American Novels*

Relatively few Korean-American novels were published before the 1980s and autobiographies and memoirs outnumber fiction. The first important Korean-American novels The Martyed and The Innocent, were written by Richard (1964) and E.Kin who was studying in the United States after serving the Korean Army from 1950-54. It explores existentialist questions on death and faith and became the American best seller and The Innocent describe the events surrounding a military coup d'état in South Korea.
Norma Okja Keller's Comfort Women and Chang- Rae Lees novels A Gesture Life focuses the abuse suffered by women.

Other recent novels explore the consequences of the Korean War and American occupation and the drama of biracialism. The immigrant struggle is described in Kim Ronyoung's Clay Walls. It also defines Korean American identity. The narratives that explore the second generations attempt to find their place in America include questions of language, interethnic marriage and urban politics.

**South Asian - American Novels**

Inspite of the presence of South Asians in the United States from the beginning of the 20th Century novels by writers of ethnic groups developed proportionately late and flourished after the 1970s. Among the earlier writers of note are Zulfikar Ghose, with novels such as The Murder of Azizkhan and The Incredible Brazilian and the prolific writer Anitha Desai, charting her trajectory as a novelist allows the reader to comprehend her process of transculturality.

The drama of immigration is central to novels such as Bharati Mukherjee's Jasmine and Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's The Mistress of Spices, Bapsi Sidhwa's An American Brat talks of a Parsi Feroza Ginwall Trader religious fundamentalism for American freedoms. Meena Alexandar's Manhathan
Music created an impact on a immigrant who struggles between cultures and relationship and succumbs to mental illness.

Indian or Pakistan history, social divisions, customs and cultural life are the centre of novels, such as Gita Mehta's A River Sutra and Raj Kriyan Desai's Hulaballoo in the Guava Orchard announces the arrival of a second generation writer who looks back on the home land. The partition is the central theme in Sidhwa's Cracking India and Shauna Singh Baldwin's What the Body Remembers, which traces the life of two women and the history of a Sikh Community.

**South East Asian - American Novels**

Novels by writers with links to countries in South east Asia also forms part of the canon of Asian - American writing. In the Coffin Tree (1985) and Irrawaddly Tango (1993) Wendy Law Yone explores the political situation in Burma and the immigration of diverse people.

Fiona Cheong's (1991) The Seat of Gods foregrounds events in Singaporean history of the 1960, narrated through the eyes of a young girl. National Book Award Winning poet Shirley Geok-Lin Lim also engages the intersection of the personal with the political in her first novel Joss and Gold set in three countries - Malaysia, the United States and Singapore. The continuing trauma of the Vietnam war is the subtext of Lan Cao's The

Undoubtedly, South Asian novelists writing in English arrived on the international scene on a grand scale. The publication of Salman Rushdie's prize-winning novel Midnights Children in 1981, followed by the unprecedented popularity of his subsequent work, the many best sellers written by Anita Desai, Amitav Ghosh, Vikram Chandra, Bharati Mukherjee's National Book Critics' Circle Award in 1988, the cinematic adaptations of Michael Ondaatje’s The English Patient and Bapsi Sidwa’s Cracking India, Arundhati Ray’s Booker Prize in 1997, and the selection of Rohinton Mistry’s A Fine Balance by acclaimed Talk Show hostess Oprah Winfrey are a few of the notable highlights in recent years that have contributed to drawing the world’s attention to South Asian Literature written in English.12

The language in which these novels are written is a paramount factor. The beginnings of South Asian Literature in English may be traced back to the early days of English education in India. The tradition of English studies in colonial India began with the passing of the Charter Act of 1813 when the East India Company took on the responsibility for native education in 1857. When the British Crown took over the Company and formally patterned the Indian University System after the curriculum at London University. The
development of an English curriculum in upper-class Indian schools was the direct result of the moral and political issue that were outlined in Thomas Macaulay's famous 1835 Minutes of Indian Education, as well as by William Benticks English Education Act, which made the study of English mandatory in India. Although many Indian scholars felt that indigenous languages would suffer because of the wide spread of proliferation of English, there were many Indian Reformers - Raja Ram Mohan Roy favoured and encouraged the study of the English Language in India. Thus the post-independence generation of writers of the Indian subcontinent could speak and write English effectively. Furthermore few of the South Asian novelists have been educated in England, Australia, and the United States, while some of these even immigrated to these countries. They exude a definite sense of confidence in the ease and elegance with which they are able to use the English language.\footnote{13}

Another reason why South Asian novels have geared so much acclaim is that this literature represents a writing of great power and relevance. These novelists insists on their own perspectives, providing largely alternative views of the South Asian sentiment to those that fuelled the imagination through the nostalgic, idealized imagery found in the novels of Rudyard Kipling, E.M. Foster, Paul Scott and others.

Moreover South Asian writers show a vibrant, exotic, chaotic world where people seem more robust and spirited than in most other contemporary
fiction; where exuberance and compromise infuse daily life; where religion and politics matter profoundly, where the follies and foibles of humanity are showcased with precise satire, and where ancient traditions are brought face to face with the conventions of modern living.

References


7. ibid. p.67.


13. Ibid p.xii