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ON GEOGRAPHICAL AND METAPHORICAL (FAULT) LINES: IMMIGRATION, ACCULTURATION AND GENERATION GAP IN SOUTH ASIAN AMERICAN WOMEN'S FICTION

A b s t r a c t. In numerous immigrant narratives by South Asian American women writers, the process of immigration is construed as the crossing of a line, or of several lines, to be more specific. The act of crossing the geographical line of the border precedes the crossing of more metaphorical boundaries, for example those between the two cultural scenarios operative in the writers' native and adopted cultures. In the process, yet another metaphorical line is drawn between first- and second-generation immigrants, two groups that inevitably experience immigration in two completely divergent ways. The purpose of this article is to discuss several literary texts based on the construction of a literal or metaphorical line written by first- and second-generation South Asian American women writers (namely, Meena Alexander, Bharati Mukherjee, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni and Jhumpa Lahiri) to map the different standpoints from which first- and second-generation writers explore the issue of migration. This analysis will be situated in the context of what Meena Alexander, a first-generation South Asian American poet and novelist, terms "fault lines" when she writes in her memoir: "In Manhattan, I am a fissured thing, a body crossed by fault lines" (*Fault Lines* 182). The concept of the geological fault line serves as a powerful metaphor for the fractures and discontinuities inherent in the process of immigration that will be discussed in this article.

Key words: South Asian American women's fiction; immigrant narrative; first- and second-generation immigrant writing; Meena Alexander; Bharati Mukherjee; Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni; Jhumpa Lahiri.

In comparison with other ethnic minorities, immigrants from South Asia have had a rather short history in the United States. South Asians began migrating to the US on a relatively large scale only after 1965, the year the

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anti-immigration legislation was changed, encouraging the immigration to the US of well-educated professionals. The Hart-Celler Act of 1965 "raised the immigration ceiling and allotted Eastern Hemisphere nations 20,000 annual visas distributed according to a system favoring 'family reunification' and professional skills" (Lee 132).[1] As a result, the numbers of immigrants from Asia—including the Indian Peninsula—soared, amounting to 34 percent of all immigrants between 1965 and 2002 (Louie 111). Soon after 1965, South Asians began publishing literary works that expressed their experiences of migration and assimilation into the new cultural reality. Many of these accounts came from women writers, who are—as a rule—more vocal and more visible on the literary scene, both at home on the Indian Subcontinent and in the diaspora. As Lau puts it, "it is predominantly the diasporic women writers who are the creators and keepers of the global literary image of South Asian culture" (572).

Numerous immigrant narratives by South Asian women writers are based on the construction of a literal or metaphorical line. The frequent usage in South Asian American immigrant literature of a line—which is after all a spatial entity—testifies to the significance of spatial concepts for the discussion of immigrant identity. Arguing for "the centrality of space . . . to the locations of identity," Susan Friedman defines identity in spatial terms as "a historically embedded site, a positionality, a location, a standpoint, a terrain, an intersection, a network, a crossroads of multiply situated knowledges" (19). As regards ethnic subjects, their hybrid identities result from "movement through space, from one part of the globe to another. This migration through space materializes a movement through different cultures that effectively constitutes identity as the product of cultural grafting" (Friedman 24). Hence, it is in the borderlands—spaces in between cultures—or through movement from one cultural space to another that hybrid identity is produced. Helena Grice applies the spatial theory of identity to Asian American women's writing in particular, where space often functions as a metaphor for identity (200). The image of a line in South Asian American immigrant fiction is, therefore, a trope for personal and communal identity as produced via migration; various forms a line may take indicate the most important as-

[1] While cautioning against treating a single law as fundamental in stimulating immigration, Song nevertheless admits that the US legislators "helped to create the conditions that made it possible for Asian Americans to look the way they do, with preferences to immigrants from professional background favoring the growth of an Asian American population that is in large numbers highly educated and employed in white-collar professions" (11).

pects of life affected by migration, namely a changed/ing sense of self, modified family dynamics and the transformed attitudes to both the home and the adopted countries.

The most obvious line in the context of immigrant experience and its literary representations is the line of the border. It is a truism to say that to get to any foreign country a migrant needs to cross the border. In the case of South Asians' literary accounts of migration, however, the border is more than just the line demarcating the limits of the country. It is a metaphorical line as well, a line of division between two cultural orders that are presented as completely dissimilar. In much of South Asian American women's fiction, the crossing of the US border is not rendered in a neutral way but is rather depicted as an entrance into a better world which offers more than its South Asian antagonist. According to Inderpal Grewal, such a dichotomous presentation of America and Asia is a characteristic feature of Asian American immigrant women's fiction, which renders "migration as a movement from incarceration within a patriarchal culture to freedom within American liberal civil society. . . . [This movement is] also set up as the tension between tradition and modernity and the process of a woman's escape from one to the other" (63). Such a representation of immigration inevitably results in the dichotomy "between the United States as first world site of freedom and 'Asia' as third world site of repression" (63). An example of the fictional representation of America and India as binary opposites may be found in Amulya Malladi's novel *The Mango Season*. Its protagonist, a twenty seven-year-old woman named Priya, returns to India after her seven-year-long stay in San Francisco and finds herself appalled by India's oppressiveness and backwardness, which she problematically juxtaposes with American values of liberty and opportunity.[2]

A more nuanced and mediated vision of migration may be found in Meena Alexander's writings. In her memoir, the India-born poet and novelist employs the spatial term "fault lines" to express the ruptures of migration when she writes: "In Manhattan, I am a fissured thing, a body crossed by

[2] Inderpal Grewal illustrates her concept of the dichotomy inherent in Asian immigrant women's narrative with a different example, that of Bharati Mukherjee's novel *Jasmine*. In my view, however, *Jasmine*'s complexity makes its understanding only in terms of the juxtaposition between India and America, oppression in the former and liberation in the latter, somewhat reductive. For a more detailed discussion, see my analysis of Mukherjee's *Jasmine* and Malladi's *The Mango Season* in *Bicultural Bodies: A Study of South Asian American Women's Literature* (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 2013): 44–51 and 110–115, respectively.

fault lines" (*Fault Lines* 182). As geological fault lines are zones where tectonic plates meet and exert pressure on each other, at times with violent results in the form of earthquakes, migrants as well experience the tremendous pressure of both their home and adopted cultures. This pressure makes them torn between two worlds, able to fit in neither of them. An example of such a splintered subjectivity is Alexander's protagonist in her second novel *Manhattan Music*, Sandhya Rosenblum, whose immigrant anxiety leads to her depression and a suicide attempt.[3] In her depiction of migration, Alexander focuses on corporeal experiences inherent in the immigration process when she speaks of a *body* crossed by fault lines. The pressure of migration is felt by many literary characters as a corporeal one, for it affects not only the mind but also, perhaps primarily, the body. Elsewhere in her memoir, Alexander writes:

> It is our bodies that press against the actual of America, against the barbed wires and internment camps and quotas and stereotypes of silent women with long black hair sticking flowers in neat vases. We need the truth of our bodies to reach what ethnicity means, what the imagination must work with. And to get to this real place we need the bodily self. (195–196)

Alexander calls attention to the fact that it is through their ethnically marked bodies that newcomers to the US experience migration in all its aspects.

The corporeal character of immigration is stressed in both Alexander's *Manhattan Music* and Bharati Mukherjee's famous novel *Jasmine*, whose eponymous heroine flees oppression and danger in India to acquire agency and voice in the US.[4] Alexander's Sandhya struggles to accept her brown femininity, standing in stark contrast to her husband's white body, whose whiteness she escapes from into the brown arms of another ethnic subject, an Egyptian-American scholar. The pressure of immigration is so strong that Sandhya finally attempts to annihilate her body by hanging herself. In the

[3] Sandhya's state of mind can be understood in terms of what Gloria Anzaldúa calls "a *mestiza* consciousness" (236). For a more detailed analysis of Alexander's novel, including Sandhya's in-between status, see my "'A Bridge That Seizes Crossing': Art, Violence and Ethnic Identity in Meena Alexander's *Manhattan Music*" in *Polish Journal for American Studies* 8 (2014): 149–166.

[4] This vexed process is rendered in a problematic way as Jasmine's success in the US is contingent on her Oriental beauty and sex appeal. This is precisely the reason why Mukherjee's novel has been severely criticized by many scholars, especially those of South Asian provenance, its popular appeal notwithstanding.

case of Mukherjee's Jasmine, both the initial image of her stay in the US and the final image of the novel show her American experience in corporeal terms. She experiences rape at the very entrance to the US, which she survives by impersonating the Hindu goddess of revenge Kali and killing her rapist. The novel ends with the image of the pregnant protagonist heading west to begin anew. All in all, Alexander shows in her writings the powerful forces operating at the line of the border, forces that may—figuratively speaking—tear the person crossing the line apart. Her vision of the migrant as still poised on the border between the two worlds differs from Mukherjee's account of immigration in *Jasmine* as a relatively smooth and unencumbered movement from one place to the next, symbolized by the protagonist's changing her name to account for each stage of her life.

The spatial concept of a line is also employed in South Asian American women's fiction in a more figurative way to indicate the divides between generations that occur as an outcome of migration. For example, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni in her short story "Mrs. Dutta Writes a Letter" shows the generation gap between first-generation immigrants and their relatives in India as one that cannot be bridged. A first-generation professional immigrant couple with kids portrayed by Divakaruni finds it difficult to accommodate the needs and habits of the husband's widowed mother who comes to live with them in the US. Although they strive hard not to show it, the Americanized Indians find the grandmother's household habits appalling. The daughter-in-law, a professional who works outside the home and shares household duties with her husband, feels her precarious status as a first-generation immigrant threatened by the arrival of the grandmother. Living in what she calls "a nice neighborhood" (Divakaruni, *Unknown Errors* 14) where they are the only Indian family,[5] Shyamoli tries not to give her neighbors any reason to look down on her. Her efforts are thwarted by her mother-in-law, who against Shyamoli's wishes hangs her laundry on the fence to dry—the way she has done it her whole life in India. Confronted about the occurrence by the neighbor, Shyamoli finally gives vent to her pent-up frustration:

[5] Divakaruni's story may be treated as a literary illustration of a pattern noticed by sociologists, whereby "[e]ducated Asian professional families are able to settle in suburban locations characterized by high performing public schools and excellent public services. For example, families of South Asian (primarily Indian) doctors, engineers, and high-tech professionals enjoy some of the highest family incomes of all Asian Americans" (Glenn 90).

> I've explained over and over, and she [her mother-in-law] still keeps on doing what I've asked her not to—throwing away perfectly good food, leaving dishes to drip all over the countertops. Ordering my children to stop doing things I've given them permission for. She's taken over the entire kitchen, cooking whatever she likes. You come in the door and the smell of grease is everywhere, in all our clothes. I feel like this isn't my house anymore. (30)

Within the narrative logic of the story, Shyamoli's freedom to articulate her needs and wishes is shown as a result of her Americanization. The vocal professional is a far cry from "the Indian Shyamoli, the docile bride she [Mrs. Dutta]'d mothered for a month before putting her on a Pan Am flight to join her husband" (13–14) in America. Unable and unwilling to assimilate to the way of life of her Americanized family and to change her concept of cleanliness that demands, for instance, that leftover food be disposed of straightaway or that dishes be washed immediately instead of being left in the dishwasher, the older woman decides to go back to India, thereby admitting that the ties between family members get irrevocably loosened as a result of migration. Immigration is shown in the story as a process that necessitates the adoption of new cultural mores—ones that cannot be reconciled with those at work in the country of origin.

In another story by Divakaruni the family conflict resultant from migration does not antagonize generations but spouses. The title of the story, "Doors," is in itself based on the spatial image of a door, which—whether open or closed—indicates a line separating two distinct spaces. The spaces divided by the door turn out in the story to be the cultural worlds of Preeti, a young woman raised in the US since the age of 12—being, therefore, a representative of what sociologists term "1.5 generation"[6]—and her husband Deepak, a recent arrival from India. The two get married despite the warnings and worries of their respective kin and friends. Preeti's mother is sure Deepak would want to enforce Indian rules of masculinity and femininity, which she finds archaic and oppressive to women, while Deepak's friends are worried that Preeti would turn out to be just a typical American woman, "always bossing you, always thinking about [herself]" (Divakaruni, *Arranged Marriage* 185). These opinions articulated by well-meaning relatives and friends turn out to be a self-fulfilling prophecy. Despite doing fine at the outset of their marriage, the couple grows inevitably apart following the ar-

[6] As Louie puts it, "the generational designation '1.5' has become increasingly common in both folk and academic works to describe those who immigrate as children (before adolescence)" (113).

rival from India of Deepak's cousin, Raj, in whose company Deepak falls easily back into his Indian mores and customs and finds it increasingly difficult to understand Preeti's need for privacy.

The door functions in the story as a line of demarcation; the attitude to the door as a spatial marker is a signal of the overall attitude of the individual to the two cultural worlds s/he is familiar with. Preeti's insistence on keeping the doors closed is contrasted in the story with her husband's and his cousin's preference for being together in the open spaces, in the manner typical of Indian houses. The chasm between Preeti and the two men is indicated at the very beginning of Raj's stay when he declines her offer to sleep in the guest bedroom, saying: "You'd better save the guest bedroom for real guests. About six square feet of space—right here between the dining table and the sofa—is all I need" (191) to spread the mattress on the floor. Later on, during his protracted stay, Raj to the exasperation of Preeti enforces his vision of the way a household should be organized:

> The concept of doors did not exist in Raj's universe, and he ignored their physical reality—so solid and reassuring to Preeti—whenever he could. He would burst into her closed study to tell her of the latest events in his computer lab, leaving the door ajar when he left. He would throw open the door to the garage where she did the laundry to offer help, usually just as she was folding her underwear. Even when she retreated to her little garden in search of privacy, there was no escape. From the porch, he gave solicitous advice on the drooping fuchsias. (193)

When late in the story Raj again proves unable to read the cultural meaning of the closed door as a sign of prohibition to enter and goes into Preeti's room to offer her some medication for her headache, for Preeti this is the last straw and she breaks down demanding that Raj leave their household. Even though Deepak grants her this wish, it is clear that their relationship is scarred forever. Deepak moves to the guest bedroom vacated by his cousin and what Preeti hears just before falling asleep is the sound of the door "finally click[ing] shut" (202). The door, then, becomes a symbol of the unbridgeable gap between an America-raised Indian and one recently arrived from India.

Although the portrayals of family conflicts in Divakaruni's stories may be treated as simplistically subscribing to the stereotypical presentation of America and India as binary opposites, what the writer does succeed in is complicating the conventional assumptions concerning the connections im-

migrant generations have with their homeland: the first-generation immigrants in her fiction, here Shyamoli and Preeti's mother, do not necessarily indulge in nostalgia over the lost homeland and are instead willing to embrace what America has to offer. As Louie argues, "[m]odels of generational conflict as applied to Asian American families and communities often assume that conflict between generations is due to later generations assimilating to U.S. culture, and thus deviating from the ways of their elders" (111), which disregards the complexity of the issue. The fact that in Divakaruni's stories first-generation immigrants form coalitions with their 1.5-generation or second-generation children to the detriment of the newcomers with stronger ties to the homeland may, however, be seen as problematic in itself inasmuch as it subscribes to the essentialized notions of rigid Indianness and Americanness that can by no means be reconciled.

Interestingly, the concept of a line, whether understood literally as the line of the border or metaphorically as the divisions incurred by immigration, seems to lose some of its immediacy in the writings of second-generation immigrants. This tendency may signal the fact that immigrant identity and its spatial representations are no longer of major interest to writers born in the West. Presumably, they feel more secure in their identities as Americans and hence feel no need to explore the ramifications of immigration to the extent they first-generation counterparts did. For example, Jhumpa Lahiri's characters tend to be simply Americans who weave their two cultural backgrounds into one idiosyncratic but sustainable whole. In contrast to some of the first-generation writers, Lahiri manages to avoid stereotypical and essentialized pictures of South Asia and America. Rajini Srikanth's comment concerning the characters in Lahiri's short story "A Temporary Matter" that "[t]hey feel no need to 'perform' their ethnicity, nor do they feel it necessary to assert their assimilation into the U.S. social fabric" (147) may likewise be applied to the second-generation writers themselves, whose fiction shows "the *normalcy* of the South Asian American presence on the American landscape" (147, emphasis in the original).[7] As

[7] Yet, it has to be admitted that the gap between generations remains a significant concern, for example, in Lahiri's first novel *The Namesake*, whose protagonist, Gogol, struggles to separate himself from his first-generation parents to finally accept them and, by inference, the Indian part of himself at the end of the novel. For an interesting analysis of the difference between first and second generation of South Asian immigrants in Lahiri's fiction understood in terms of space and place, see Iwona Filipczak's article "Representations of Diasporic Experience Through Space and Place in Jhumpa Lahiri's *Unaccustomed Earth*" in *Roczniki Humanistyczne* LXI:5 (2013): 239-250.

Min Hyoung Song puts it, second-generation writers "do write stories about Asians who have immigrated to the United States, [but] they also branch out and write a much wider variety of stories" (12).

To conclude, the concept of a line is a powerful trope in South Asian American fiction that serves several purposes. The spatial line of the border marks radical changes incurred by immigration and is often used by first-generation writers to indicate the differences between the two cultural worlds of East and West. The figurative line of a generation gap in turn shows immigration to be an experience whose sheer force tears families apart. The excessive emphasis on the chasm between the two parts of the world in first-generation immigrant narratives may, however, lead to what Lisa Lau terms re-orientalizing the Orient by the diasporic Orientals (573). It seems that in second-generation writings questions of immigration and acculturation lose some of their immediacy and are replaced by other concerns, ones that are not necessarily specific to South Asian Americans only.

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O LINIACH GEOGRAFICZNYCH I METAFORYCZNYCH – IMIGRACJA, AKULTURACJA I LUKA GENERACYJNA W TWÓRCZOŚCI PISAREK HINDUSKO-AMERYKAŃSKICH

S t r e s z c z e n i e

Wiele tekstów autorstwa pisarek pochodzenia hindusko-amerykańskiego poświęconych procesowi imigracji odwołuje się do metafory linii, zastosowanej nie tylko do zilustrowania faktu przekroczenia geograficznej granicy państwa, ale także różnicy między dwoma kulturowymi skryptami obowiązującymi w kraju ojczystym i docelowym czy też konfliktu między pokoleniami imigrantów, których doświadczenia imigracji są z natury zupełnie inne. Niniejszy artykuł stanowi analizę kilku tekstów literackich opartych na konstrukcji literalnej lub metaforycznej linii autorstwa pisarek hindusko-amerykańskich pierwszego i drugiego pokolenia (takich jak Meena Alexander, Bharati Mukherjee, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni i Jhumpa Lahiri) w celu ukazania odmiennego spojrzenia pisarek pierwszego i drugiego pokolenia na doświadczenie emigracji. Ta analiza usytuowana jest w kontekście pojęcia uskoku tektonicznego (ang. *fault line*), używanego przez Meenę Alexander, poetkę i pisarkę pierwszego pokolenia. Pojęcie uskoku tektonicznego jawi się jako metafora pęknięć i nieciągłości nieodzownie związanych z procesem migracji dyskutowanym w niniejszym artykule.

Słowa kluczowe: literatura hindusko-amerykańska; powieść imigracyjna; pisarstwo pierwszego i drugiego pokolenia imigrantek; Meena Alexander; Bharati Mukherjee; Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni; Jhumpa Lahiri.