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# Displaced Selves, Dislocated Identities: The Indian (American) Experience of Migration in G. S. Sharat Chandra's *Sari of the Gods*

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Home is where your feet are, and may your heart be there too!  
—Uma Parameswaran<sup>1</sup>

N'appartenir à aucun lieu, aucun temps, aucun amour. L'origine perdue, l'enracinement impossible, la mémoire plongeante, le présent en suspens. L'espace de l'étranger est un train en marche, un avion en vol, la transition même qui exclut l'arrêt. De repères, point. [...] Toujours ailleurs, l'étranger n'est de nulle part.  
—Julia Kristeva, *Etrangers à nous-mêmes*<sup>2</sup>

G. S. Sharat Chandra (1935-2000) grew up in the small town of Nanjangud, South India. The son of a rich lawyer, he was made to study law by his father and began a career in the legal field. However, Chandra “was secretly planning to leave the country to pursue a literary life,” as he confided in an interview.<sup>3</sup> In the sixties he decided to resume his studies, first in Canada, then in the United States, so as to

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<sup>1</sup> Uma Parameswaran, “Home is where your feet are, and may your heart be there too!” in Jasbir Jain (ed.), *Writers of Indian Diaspora: Theory and Practice*, Jaipur & New Delhi, Rawat Publications, 1998, p. 30-39.

<sup>2</sup> Julia Kristeva, *Etrangers à nous-mêmes*, Paris, Fayard, 1988, p. 17-18. English translation: “Not belonging to anywhere, any time, any love. A lost origin, the impossibility to take root, a rummaging memory, the present in abeyance. The space of a foreigner is a moving train, a plane in flight, the very transition that precludes stopping. As to landmarks, there are none. [...] Always elsewhere, the foreigner belongs nowhere.” Julia Kristeva, *Strangers to Ourselves*, trans. by Leon S. Roudiez, New York, Columbia UP, 1991, p. 7-8 and 10.

<sup>3</sup> Mary Vasudeva and Deepika Bahri, “Swallowing for Twenty Years/the American Mind and Body’: An Interview with G. S. Sharat Chandra,” *Journal of Commonwealth and Postcolonial Studies* 5.1 (Fall 1997), p. 1. I would like to thank Deepika Bahri for e-mailing me the typescript of the interview.

escape his destiny and try his luck as a writer. Chandra, who eventually settled down in Missouri and married an American, published numerous poems together with a collection of short stories, *Sari of the Gods* (1998).<sup>4</sup> Thus, for Chandra, like many postcolonial writers, expatriation and uprootedness also became the rich material that informs his works, his short stories in particular.

*Sari of the Gods* includes nineteen short stories and is divided into three sections: "Here" focuses on the plight of newly arrived Indian immigrants in the United States; "There" takes the reader to India, the lost motherland of the fifties and sixties; and "Neither Here Nor There" portrays returnees who have become misfits in their country of origin. The collection of stories, written from the standpoint of the émigré, thus hinges upon the notion of geographical et cultural (dis)locations. Yet, more than simply mapping out the transcontinental journey of migrants, the three sections refer to and interrogate the concept of "home," and in relation to it, the function of place in the (re)construction of identity. This paper will examine how in "Here," the first section of his work, the expatriate writer explores the themes of migration, displacement and alienation that contribute to shaping a new Indian American self. We will demonstrate how, through the use of symbols and images deeply engrained in Hindu culture, Chandra constructs shifting and conflicting diasporic identities, and addresses the questions of ethnicity, class and gender in the context of migration.

In "Here," the author creates a diverse range of confused characters, displaced Others facing culture shock. In the title story "Sari of the Gods," Shekar and his wife Prapulla are new New Yorkers who exemplify the problematic repositioning of the immigrant confronted with necessary and inevitable adjustments that threaten his/her cultural integrity. Prapulla, "a proper Hindu wife, shy, courteous, and traditional" (SG 15), feels alienated in her confinement to their "strange apartment" (SG 14) and views her expatriation as a curse while her husband strives for success and takes an assimilationist stance: "he had seen many of his brown brethren on the city streets, looking strange and out of place. Now he dreaded being surrounded by his kind, ending up like them building little Indias in the obscure corners of New York" (SG 14). Shekar fears ending up relegated to or ghettoized in an ethnic neighborhood and becoming consequently absorbed in the spiral of marginality and failure. While many insecure uprooted newcomers view the "little Indias" of American cities as inclusive communal places of refuge that allow them to preserve and perpetuate their traditions, Shekar rejects the concept of multiculturalism that leads to the segmentation of American society along racial and social lines. Through Shekar, the author depicts bourgeois Indian immigrants who are determined to join the mainstream of American life and who thus, as formulated by Susan Koshy, "negotiate the U.S. multicultural terrain by circumventing a confrontation with race by stressing ethnicity and class position."<sup>5</sup>

<sup>4</sup> G. S. Sharat Chandra, *Sari of the Gods*, Minneapolis, Coffee House Press, 1998. Hereafter *SG*.

<sup>5</sup> Susan Koshy, "South Asians and the Complex Interstices of Whiteness: Negotiating Public Sentiment in the United States and Britain," in Samina Najmi and Rajini Srikanth (eds), *White Women in Racialized Spaces: Imaginative Transformation and*

Willing to “develop a strong bond” (SG 16) with his new European American colleagues, Shekar invites them for dinner, actually an artifice to exhibit his new Americanized self: “He had set the wine glasses next to the handloomed napkins as he had seen in *Good Housekeeping*” (SG 17). Ironically enough, Shekar’s domestic performance may be related to “the stereotypical conceptions of Asian American men as ‘efficient housewives’ – as effeminate, illegitimate and divided.”<sup>6</sup> Whereas he purposely eats corned beef on rye at work (in the public sphere), thus transgressing religious taboos with much pride and provocation so as to become an American, Shekar entertains his guests with “exotic” spicy food to their great delight, thereby reinforcing their “orientalist” vision of the subcontinent and identifying himself as an Indian (in the private sphere). The apparent contradiction between his self-Americanization and his self-exoticization reveals Shekar’s changing identity, his conflicting ideals and aspirations: his will to succeed by conforming to the “model-minority myth” as a middle-class South Asian, his need to blend in and be accepted by mainstream America, as well as the will to preserve and promote his culture while perpetuating essentialized images of India. Shekar’s ambivalent, inadequate behavior and his laughable masquerade are symptomatic of “the over-anxious attempts by Asian Americans to gain acceptance” that “have stripped them of their dignity and have caused them to suffer from severe psychological disorders characterized by lack of confidence, low self-esteem, excessive conformity and alienation.”<sup>7</sup>

The dinner party turns out to be a fiasco when one of the guests spills brandy on Prapulla’s garment,

her wedding sari with its blue, hand-spun silk and its silver border on which images of the gods had been embroidered. (SG 15) [...] The different avatars of Lord Shiva and the demons he killed [...] gleamed under the light. [...] the alcohol hissed like a magical serpent over the sari spreading its poisonous hood. The silver corroded immediately and the avatars, disfigured and mutilated, almost merged. (SG 18-19)

The bridal sari becomes the story’s central metaphor for loss and destruction. With its embroidered vignettes, it can be read as a text, a narrative that weaves the sacred legend of Shiva together with the characters’ personal stories. For Prapulla, Shekar’s grotesque mimicry, his desperate need to pretend and conform, is the cause of her misfortune. Blaming her “corrupt” husband, named after one of Shiva’s numerous avatars, Prapulla associates the brandy he served (as a token of his Westernization) with the venom of the sea serpent that Shiva drank to prevent havoc, as legend has it. Shiva, the ambivalent incarnation of both creation and destruction along with asceticism and orgiastic desires, represents the laws of

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*Ethical Action in Literature*, New York, State University of New York Press, 2002, p. 38.

<sup>6</sup> David E. Eng, “Out Here and Over There: Queerness and Diaspora in Asian American Studies,” in Kent A. Ono (ed.), *A Companion to Asian American Studies*, Malden, MA, Blackwell, 2015, p. 354.

<sup>7</sup> Bob H. Suzuki, “Education and the Socialization of Asian Americans: A Revisionist Analysis of the ‘Model Minority’ Thesis,” *Amerasia Journal* 4.2 (1977), p. 42.

cyclical time, the never-ending shift between negation and affirmation, dissolution and rebirth. Chandra uses the ruined sari, Prapulla's "second self, the sail [...] of her destiny" (SG 20), as the metonymic representation of her shattered life as a deracinated woman.

On that same night, Prapulla dreams of her own funeral. In her nightmare, Shekar sets her ablaze in her sari:

She felt nothing but an intense heat around her. The flames did not seem to touch her. She was not on the pyre but was standing with her family. It was her wedding sari wrapped around a giant bottle of brandy that was burning! Inside the bottle a demon danced, spitting fire. The avatars slowly uncurled from the silver border like an inflated raft and ascended the smoke. They were all in miniature, fragile in their postures and luminous. The brandy in the bottle foamed and swirled like an ocean. The demon raved in its ring of fire. Prapulla screamed. (SG 22)

The terrifying dream can be read as a reference to the Hindu practice of sati, the self-sacrifice of widows. More symbolically, it suggests Prapulla's feeling of subjugation, her fears about her new life as a migrant, the personal sacrifices it implies and the threat of losing her cultural integrity. Feeling dispossessed of her secure world, of her identity as an Indian woman and wife, the character yet knows that life is a constant renewal: "Dawn would soon brim the horizon of her new world [...]. She sat in the dark of the living room with the sari on her lap, caressing its border absentmindedly. A brittle piece broke and fell" (SG 22). Symbolically, in the same way as Shiva transforms the remains of the pre-existing world to create a new order, Prapulla plans to use what is left of her fraying sari to make a dress for her daughter. The recycled fabric that she will pass on to Ratri as a legacy is more than a remnant from a receding past; it also attests to the character's acceptance of transience, her sense of change and regeneration, as well as her need to reconstruct her identity on new terms. This rearticulation of tradition and the transmission of a reinvented past from mother to daughter in the context of diaspora also highlights the conventional vision of women as bearers of tradition, "relegating [them] to the role of keepers of [Indian] culture, hearth, and home."<sup>8</sup>

Repeatedly, Chandra uses clothing as the symbolic marker of a gendered cultural identity that is called into question in a new hostile environment. In "Dot Busters," Indian immigrant women are molested by a racist white gang for wearing saris and kumkum dots (or bindis). Chandra was undoubtedly inspired by a true story, a violent hate crime committed in Jersey City, New Jersey: in 1987, an

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<sup>8</sup> Shamita Das Dasgupta and Sayantani DasGupta, "Bringing up Baby: Raising a 'Third World' Daughter in the 'First World,'" in Sonia Shah (ed.), *Dragon Ladies: Asian American Feminists Breathe Fire*, Boston, South End Press, 1997, p. 192. In the same vein, Sandyha Rao Mehta states that, "In many ways, gender becomes an important consideration for the diaspora as women are not only seen to be the retainers of cultural identities but are actually responsible for physical reproduction in the homeland as well as the new land." See Sandyha Rao Mehta (ed.), "Introduction: Revisiting Gendered Spaces in the Diaspora," *Exploring Gender in the Literature of the Indian Diaspora*, Cambridge, Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2015, p. 6.

Indian immigrant was beaten to death by a racist gang called “Dotbusters” that harassed and attacked South Asians.<sup>9</sup> Through his characters, Chandra also exposes divergent identities within a heterogeneous Indian community in the U.S., with the presence of recently arrived migrants, like Poonam and her husband, who have become part of the American working class, next to longer established middle- and upper-class Indian Americans who are better integrated into mainstream society, like the character of Rhada: “Radha felt alienated from most of the new Indians who arrived from different parts of the country, but at times it was comforting to see them in the aisles of whiteness or to hear a familiar phrase in Hindi followed by a run of abrupt English, as if they were all practicing” (SG 23). Chandra highlights growing tensions in the Indian American diaspora about the preservation of a so-called “authentic” national and cultural identity. As ethnicity and gender intersect with social class within the multicultural context of the U.S., the author aims to illustrate how the bindi becomes an ostentatious tool, a polysemous marker of differences, inclusion, and/or exclusion. Indeed, Radha argues that, “The Indian women wore the traditional red mark to signify they were Hindu – and suddenly this symbol of belonging had marked her as an outsider” (SG 25).

Chandra’s semiotics of dress, his characters’ symbolic outfits used as indirect characterization clearly illustrate the fact that dress is “the site in which politics, identity and subjectivity encounter one another,” as David Geczy stated in his work *Fashion and Orientalism*.<sup>10</sup> Indeed, For Poonam and her friends who abide by the restrictive “laws of Indian womanhood” (SG 32), wearing saris and bindis is a way of claiming their national gender identity in the face of racism and cultural prejudices: “Why should I change?” Poonam asks, “I’m an Indian woman living in America. That doesn’t mean I should give up my habits. I dress the way I want, go out when I want, where I want!” (SG 26). By contrast, Radha rejects a cultural nationalism shaped by Hindu traditions: “Nowadays Radha felt at home in the anonymity of the America Levi’s and shirt. She wasn’t going to change to appease Asian critics” (SG 32-33). Then, for Radha who has fully adopted Western style dress, wearing “a large crimson dot” on her forehead (SG 33) after her first confrontation with the Dot Busters becomes a subversive act of self-exoticization and must be read as a provocation and the ideological reappropriation of a contested identity.

In her violent interaction with the white gang, both ethnicity and gender delineate Radha’s otherness. The clash generates her fear of losing her dual cultural identity together with her dignity:

In nightmares, the Indian past mixed with the American present. She was drawn by the tip of her sari through old Indian streets by American movie gangsters who [...] stripped her like Draupadi. But unlike Draupadi’s sari, which after being blessed by Lord Krishna kept growing forever, Radha’s sari dissolved, leaving her naked. (SG 27-28)

<sup>9</sup> See Michel Marriot, “In Jersey City, Indians Protest Violence,” *The New York Times*, October 12, 1987, p. 1.

<sup>10</sup> Adam Geczy, *Fashion and Orientalism: Dress, Textiles and Culture from the 17th to the 21st Century*, London, Bloomsbury, 2013, p. 1.

Integrating the *Mahabharata* as intertext, Chandra associates the white thugs with the epic's cruel and humiliating Kurava brothers who ordered their soldiers to pull off Draupadi's sari. Through the image of the naked female body, the author dramatizes the Indian woman's experience of immigration in terms of vulnerability, helplessness, and exposure within a predominantly white patriarchal society.

A few years after her husband's death in America, Radha takes a feminist stance and becomes involved in a lesbian relationship with Gloria, a white American that brings her solace and yet exacerbates her disturbing sense of marginality and exclusion from both a traditionalist Indian community and a heteronormative American society: gender and sexual orientation shape her diasporic experience and her shifting sense of self as an Indian American<sup>11</sup>.

In her practical moods she recognized the conflict between her need and her reluctance to break away from all that made her what she was – a woman with ties to the past who needed to break from them, befitting the life she had chosen in America. (SG 31)

Torn between defiance and resilience, between her wish to assert her differences and her need to fit in, she “just [doesn't] feel whole. [...] Rhada felt hesitant and unsure, as if she had bifurcated into distinct halves” (SG 32). Symbolically wearing American jeans, she has turned away from the traditional world of India to embrace Western-style modernism. But “the dense past clung like cockleburs in the folds of her Levi's. One by one she had to take them off. It wasn't easy” (SG 31). Chandra's use of metaphor thus illustrates how, in the context of exile, the body (in its outward appearance) becomes the site of the reconstruction of identity, the somewhat uncertain redefinition of a fragmented self. As Monbinder Kaur rightly puts it, “Torn between the conflict of duty and self-fulfilment, [diasporic South Asian] women find their bodies to be the battle ground upon which traditional values and modernity come to clash.”<sup>12</sup>

Through corporeality, and using the body as a vehicle of cultural expression, Chandra brings to light those problematic “contact zones” defined by Mary Louise Pratt as “social spaces where disparate cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in highly asymmetrical relations of domination and subordination.”<sup>13</sup> Then, Chandra also uses the bindi as a marker of bourgeois “ethno-chic” and a sign

<sup>11</sup> In her sociological study on Indians American lesbians, Naheed Islam points out that, “These immigrant women express frustration at not feeling as if they fit or ‘belong’ in either South Asia or the United States. Yet both systems simultaneously give meaning to their lives and are intertwined. They make the political move of refocusing their sense of self and identity in multiple ways.” See Naheed Islam, “Naming Desire, Shaping Identity: Tracing the Experience of Indian Lesbians in the United States,” in Shamita Das Dasgupta (ed.), *A Patchwork Shawl: Chronicles of South Asian Women in America*, New Brunswick, NJ, Rutgers UP, 1998, p. 86.

<sup>12</sup> Monbinder Kaur, “Blurring Borders/Blurring Bodies: Diaspora and Womanhood,” in Sandhya Rao Mehta (ed.), *Exploring Gender in the Literature of the Indian Diaspora*, *op. cit.*, 2015, p. 85.

<sup>13</sup> Mary Louise Pratt, *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation*, London, Routledge, 1992, p. 4.

of cultural (mis)appropriation for mainstream consumption.<sup>14</sup> Indeed, Gloria wears “plastic dots on her forehead along with buffalo horn earrings,” when she goes shopping with Radha who comments: “You look like an Indian princess in a safari outfit stepping out of a Rolls Royce to pose for Samsara” (SG 29). In her article “Temporary Tatoos,” Sunaina Maira explains that, “Henna and other markers of Indo-chic have become signifiers for a turn-of-the-millennium Orientalism.”<sup>15</sup> Through Gloria’s exoticization as a white upper-class fashion consumer, Chandra makes the same comment; he represents the dynamics of cultural interactions and draws attention to neo-colonial cultural commodification, based on a fantasized representation of the once-colonized female Other (Indian and/or African women).

The story closes on a climactic scene, a forceful altercation between Radha and Tom, the leader of the Dot Busters who threw acid on Poonam’s forehead. Wearing a metal claw “similar to the one the warrior-king Shivaji used against a Moghul invader” (SG 28) and cunningly pretending to surrender to sexual abuse, Radha, “fondling Tom’s organ, [...] opened her palm and thrust the claw upward until she could feel it sink, spraying hot, sticky blood between her fingers. Tom jerked back, holding his penis in horror as it dripped. Radha lifted the kumkum dot from her forehead and smacked it on Tom’s” (SG 33-34). Chandra fictionalizes the sordid reality of racial and sexual assaults in multiethnic America.<sup>16</sup> His female characters’ suffering in the flesh, their battered and disfigured bodies as well as Tom’s emasculation are powerful, gruesome images of conflict-ridden interactions. The author brings the brutalized body into play as a trope to suggest the loss and denial of diasporic or ethnic identity. Radha’s aggressive and offensive gesture proves to be a powerful challenge to imposed domination and deprivation based on race and gender. It is a dramatic refusal to be victimized as the sexual and cultural Other. While Prapulla and Poonam are portrayed as representative of the ideal traditional Indian woman, the dedicated mother and submissive wife who resists to change, Radha is depicted as the Americanized Indian immigrant, the feminist warrior woman who emancipates herself by rejecting hetero-patriarchal norms while she remains the ferocious defender of Indian culture and identity. Her violent reaction and victory remind us of the mythical figures of female power, Durga and

<sup>14</sup> As noted by Grace Poore, “In a country like the United States, where capitalism intersects with so-called race awareness, exploiting third world cultures, and spiritualities pass for ethnic chic or multicultural liberalism. Somewhere along the process of asserting cultural pride, people of color have begun commodifying our own and other colored (particularly geographic Third World and indigenous) people’s cultures.” See Grace Poore, “The Language of Identity,” in Shamita Das Dasgupta (ed.), *A Patchwork Shawl*, *op. cit.*, p. 27.

<sup>15</sup> Sunaina Maira, “Temporary Tatoos: Indo-Chic Fantasies and Late Capitalist Orientalism,” *Meridians: Feminism, Race, Transnationalism* 3.1 (2002), p. 137.

<sup>16</sup> “Dot Busters” recalls Bharati Mukherjee’s graphic literary representation of racial conflicts and misperceptions leading to violence. The reality of women’s sexual victimization is also exposed by Mukherjee in such stories as “Loose Ends” (*The Middleman*), closing on a rape scene, or “Dannie’s Girls” portraying Dinesh, a young second-generation Indian American who lives in the ghetto and thrives “selling docile Indian girls [promising them a Permanent Resident status in the U.S.] to hard-up Americans for real bucks” (*The Middleman and Other Stories*, New York, Grove Press, 1988, p. 143).



Kali, though her young son who witnessed the assault “smiled at her as a boy would at a father” (SG 34). Chandra blurs the borders of gender and masculinizes Rhada as he identifies his female/feminist character with the heroic Indian king Shivaji, the noble protector and dispenser of justice who does not yield to the enemy, to attest to her determination to fight back and survive. Besides, the author establishes a gender-based correspondence between geographical and sexual transgressions, between invasion, colonization, or hegemony and rape.

Throughout his stories of exile, Chandra uses the body as the site of a symbolic *mise-en-scène* in which the characters try to “remold” their selves (“Dot Busters,” SG 32), “to negotiate and translate their cultural identities”<sup>17</sup> that encompass ethnicity, class, gender and sexuality. Some clumsily attempt to integrate into mainstream America and adopt foreign (Western) ways while others struggle to preserve their Indianness. But all of them tend towards a dual identity and claim their place in a multicultural society so as to feel at home. Those who cannot cope with the vicissitudes of exile take shelter in a world of fantasy verging on insanity, like Chandra’s most pathetic character, found in “Seams and Desires.” The unnamed first-person narrator, an Indian writer (Chandra’s alter ego?), tells about his intriguing upstairs neighbor, a recent immigrant from South India who claims he has stabbed a woman to death, actually a life-sized, red-wigged dummy dressed up in a sari:

“Come look, I killed her!” Madhu said. He was wearing his Nehru jacket, the one he had brought with him to this country. [...] The Nehru jacket, stitched by an Indian tailor, was crumpled as if he never took it off. [...] The shapeless jacket [was] hanging over his shoulders like a protective shell out of which his neck peeked in fear. (SG 35-36)

The once becoming jacket, whose stylish cut calls to mind a national figure and freedom fighter, is now coming apart at the seams like Prappula’s sari. A remnant of bygone days, of a lost pride and confidence that formerly partook of a positive self-image, it indicates the character’s endeavor to hold on to a national and cultural identity that is falling apart. Locked up in his apartment, and reminiscent of Kamala Markandaya’s protagonist Srinivas in *The Nowhere Man*, Madhu epitomizes the disoriented, homesick immigrant who takes refuge in his own self-enclosed world of schizophrenia so as to free himself from burdensome humiliations and frustrations. Ill-equipped to come to grips with his situation, Madhu gives way to madness. Dreaming of romance, acting out his fantasies of dating Cindy, a red-haired American girl seen at the bazaar, the character uses the doll that crystallizes his desires to compensate for the emotional and sexual deprivation of the lonely male immigrant he is. Then, his absurd “slaying” of the doll in effigy is a theatrical and desperate way to vent his anger. It stands for the vengeful destruction of that which cannot be attained through Cindy, and which therefore undermines his masculinity: love, success and happiness, a place in America.

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<sup>17</sup> Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, London, Routledge, 1994, p. 38.

Symbolically enough, and to clear up “the oriental inscrutability of his name, which he refused to explain” (SG 39), Madhu is named after a demon killed by Durga, a powerful goddess who maintains cosmic balance. Praised in the *Devimahatmya*, a devotional text, the warlike figure, whose name means “beyond reach,” embodies the concept of *maya* or duality and illusion. Those who have fallen under her spell experience pain and madness. Madhu’s dummy, dressed in “the magenta velvet of her blouse with its reflective miniature mirrors sewn around the border” (SG 42), does call to mind images of Durga, sumptuously clad in red. Cindy’s replica is the true-to-life yet unreal and illusory creation of a blinded and demented man who tries to give form to an impossible dream.

While Madhu lives as a marginal man, a recluse, the narrator enjoys his spacious home with his American wife: “I liked the largeness the house gave us. Its walls hung back from our bodies as if surrendering to us the choice to be what we wished” (SG 37). The narrator’s new place gives him a sense of stability, freedom, and intimacy; it reflects his social adaptation. By contrast, Madhu’s “sanctuary” (SG 44), his dark and damp “cloister” with the “smell of incense,” “posters of gods and Indian movie stars,” the mosquito curtain “that smelled of mildew and sweat,” and the “deep fissures” in the ceiling (SG 42) are all suggestive of Madhu’s fractured psyche, of his regression and escapism from reality and society: “Life is such a blend of odds and ends,” says the narrator. “When we are depressed or hurt, it doesn’t matter whether the wounds are real or imagined” (SG 40). In this tragicomedy, “a silly farce” (SG 44), Madhu – the madman in the attic, so to speak – fails to be part of the American fabric. Yet, with the help of the narrator’s American wife, he will patch up the disemboweled doll, seamed with scars, and refurbish his room, thus starting afresh and feeling hopeful again.

Through Madhu’s obsession with dating a white American woman and the narrator’s successful marriage, Chandra engages with the issue of interethnic relationships in the United States. For his male characters, marrying a white woman is the ultimate goal and the necessary condition for a successful integration and the realization of the American dream.

Masculinity, gender identities and the migration experience are also central themes in the story “Immigrant Beginnings.” Belur – freshly arrived in Kansas – works at King’s, a discount store and a symbolic temple of American consumerism. Impressed by the modernity and orderliness of “his new country” (SG 55), the mythical land of freedom and plenty where anyone can succeed, the youthful character gets carried away by his optimism: “At twenty-three, he was lean, healthy, and full of dreams. [...] Although he felt taller, his height hadn’t changed in America. But his cheap mirror gave him that giddy illusion each morning” (SG 53). The distorted reflection of his body, his new self, is but the image of a deluded newcomer.

Naively sentimental and unfamiliar with American rules of conduct, Belur is infatuated with Carla, a young colleague who shows him how to work the cash register (a symbol of money-making and consumer capitalism). With much disappointment, though, he discovers that she has an affair with their boss: “I get all I need from Don. Sorry,” she tells him (SG 63). Through this painful setback, Belur learns his first lesson about America, about money and sex, not love, and how the two go together, as his colleague Bob crudely points out to him:

“[...] You just came to this country, right? Do good. Once you’ve got money, chicks come to you. All the owners of Wal-Mart, Woolworth’s, King’s, they didn’t have no money. They came here with a few bucks and then they made it. Now they fuck everybody. Make money, Sheikh, you can buy all the ass you want.” (SG 63)

Bob’s cynical remarks reflect his misogynist vision of gender and power relations. He also believes that in capitalist America, class distinction eventually prevails over ethnic differences and that any man can “make it” and climb up the social ladder.

Besides, while wandering through the streets and enjoying the novelty of the American urban landscape, Belur is caught jaywalking by a policeman. Both of Belur’s misadventures are symbolic representations of the same reality. Belur fails in his attempts to conquer both land and woman, to make them his; he learns that he must keep his place and comply with the restricting regulations and social codes of his adopted country. Through these anecdotes, the author hints, in an oblique way, at the glittering lures of America and the myth of meritocracy. Just as Belur is attracted to Carla who wears a transparent black dress, “gold earrings and a stack of opalescent bracelets that jangle when she walk[s]” (SG 56), and who winks at him (playfully, and with no further intention), immigrants who leave their homelands to better their lives are seduced by the gloss and glamour of Western society that seems to have so much to offer, whether individual freedom, material success or sexual gratification.

As a consequence, after his initial short-lived state of euphoria, the main character revises his strategy:

He went to bed with three things to decide: marriage, freedom and money. Money came first. [...] For the next half hour, Belur debated identity. He was Indian but slowly changing. He’d make rapid progress from being too much of an Indian to being not so much of an Indian. Changing external appearance wasn’t a bad idea: crew cut, Levi’s, sneakers, chewing gum – preferably Big Red. Why not? To be free, one must be fearless in the face of change. Day by day his fearlessness would grow in degree. He’d be completely fearless by the time he was a citizen. [...] Money, money, more money. (SG 66)

Belur rapidly internalizes the tenets of the work ethic. Like Shekar, he is convinced that he must adopt a new look and way of life so as to be invisible and blend in. By wiping out the external signs of his foreignness and through camouflage, the character intends to gain a new national and cultural identity that will grant him full citizenship. Then, the redefinition of the self implies trading off ethnicity for social status. Looking forward and not back, Belur believes that “immigration is essentially about renewal”<sup>18</sup> and views cultural mainstreaming (or acculturation) more in terms of transformation than loss.

Chandra’s characters are all confronted with a cultural gap they have to bridge in order to find some kind of balance and inner peace. His stories focus on Indian

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<sup>18</sup> Neil Bissoondath, *Selling Illusions: The Cult of Multiculturalism in Canada*, Toronto, Penguin, 1994, p. 111.

immigrants' capacity for resilience, their vulnerability and adaptation. They highlight the complexity of intercultural relations very often based on misunderstandings and miscommunications. The Other (whether Indian or American) arouses either attraction and desire or fear and rejection. He/she is then a subjective construct, a fabricated image. Belur's crush on Carla and Madhu's erotic fantasies are fueled by young white women's deceptive "exotic" looks. Besides, Shekar's American colleague Jim, a choir member who "had always wanted to visit India" (SG 15), finds Indian music and devotional songs "rather strange and off key" (SG 17). Through Jim's remark, Chandra signifies that beyond his apparent openness and interest, and given his Western sensibility and sense of artistry, Jim is culturally unable to appreciate Indian culture, which he views as odd. "Shaking his head in dismay" (SG 17), the character is destabilized, just as much as the Dot Busters are, by a culture he cannot grasp. Chandra's émigrés have to deal with clichés and prejudices, racial discrimination and violence, whether physical or psychological. Besides, this intercultural exposure is a formative experience that helps them overcome their own preconceptions about their adopted country. In this passage to America (and Americanness) on the troubled waters of cultural integration, Chandra's "Immigrants of Loss"<sup>19</sup> are navigating their way through to an ambiguous "Third Space."<sup>20</sup> They learn to compromise, to re-evaluate and transcend their gendered Indian identities as diasporic subjects in America, to assess the possibilities and the limitations of transculturation.

Alternately using poignant realism, tragedy, as well as humor and irony, Chandra gives us a compelling imaginative representation of the multifaceted Indian American experience. His poetics of exile, which draws inspiration from Hindu mythology and oral tradition, exposes the psychic trauma of expatriation and ostracism by inscribing pain, loss, and fluidity on/in the body that becomes a significant agent in the construction of a dual cultural identity. Beyond their divergent attitudes, his characters all try to negotiate their place in America. In the context of migration they are caught in the in-betweenness of their new, fluid hybrid selves, as defined by Stuart Hall: "Diaspora identities are those which are constantly producing and reproducing themselves anew, through transformation and difference."<sup>21</sup>

The opening section, "Here," can be read as a whole, yet it must be set in perspective with the other two parts. In the middle section of his collection, entitled "There," the author takes the reader on a journey back in time and space. Invariably set in Chandra's hometown Nanjangud in the fifties and sixties, the rich and varied stories immerse the reader in a fantasized timeless traditional India, the opposite extreme of the modern material world of America. These tales help non-Indian readers become aware of the cultural gap experienced by his Indian American protagonists, yet they are also suggestive of a binary vision, Chandra's construction of East-West dichotomies. Written from the perspective of the

<sup>19</sup> This is the title of a poem by G. S. Chandra, from his collection: "Immigrants of Loss," *Immigrants of Loss*, Frome, Somerset, Hippopotamus Press, 1993.

<sup>20</sup> Homi K. Bhabha, *op. cit.*, p. 38.

<sup>21</sup> Stuart Hall, "Cultural Identity and Diaspora," in Jonathan Rutherford (ed.), *Identity: Community, Culture, Difference*, London, Lawrence & Wishart, 1990, p. 235.

nostalgic expatriate writer who tries to reconnect with the lost home through memory and imagination, Chandra's Nanjangud stories are peopled with characters whose daily lives and actions are based on superstitions, religious rituals, and Hindu spirituality. To some extent, they recall Salman Rushdie's collection, *East, West*.<sup>22</sup> Combining realism with the magical and the supernatural, the author, who has gained critical distance, also offers a light-hearted satire about tricksters (disempowered men who manage to survive), thriving imposters (politicians and "holy men" alike) and sharks (unscrupulous moneylenders) in a poverty-stricken, corruption-ridden country.

The collection's final section, "Neither Here Nor There," includes stories about returning migrants and their failure to readjust to the motherland after long years of exile. Caught in a no-man's-land, in between two cultures, Chandra's émigrés realize that today's India does not resemble the mythical place they have constructed in their minds; it cannot be called home anymore. As Andrew Gurr aptly said in *Writers in Exile*, for the exile, "home is a static concept rooted in the unalterable circumstances of childhood."<sup>23</sup> Facing the new reality of India, Chandra's disenchanted, inadequate characters feel cheated.

Along with Chandra's disseminated, dislocated characters, the reader crosses different and distant worlds. Each story offers a slice of life, a fragment of reality (or memory). Taken together, as a whole, the three sections of the book delineate the wavering image of uprooted Indians. Chandra's assemblage of stories exemplifies Salman Rushdie's definition of expatriate Indian writers:

Our identity is at once plural and partial. Sometimes we feel that we straddle two cultures; at other times, that 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. If literature is in part the business of finding new angles at which to enter reality, then once again our distances, our long geographical perspective, may provide us with such angles.<sup>24</sup>

When one reads Chandra's stories, fictional works by other Indian writers come to mind. Besides Mukherjee's, Markandaya's and Rushdie's fictions previously mentioned, Jhumpa Lahiri's debut collection, *Interpreter of Maladies*,<sup>25</sup>

<sup>22</sup> In particular the amusing stories in the first section of the collection, entitled "East." See Salman Rushdie, *East, West*, London, Vintage, 1995.

<sup>23</sup> Andrew Gurr, *Writers in Exile: The Identity of Home in Modern Literature*, Brighton, Sussex, Harvest Press, 1981, p. 23-24.

<sup>24</sup> Salman Rushdie, "Imaginary Homelands," *Imaginary Homelands: Essays and Criticism 1981-91*, London, Granta Books, 1991, p. 15.

<sup>25</sup> As critic Jyoti Mishra puts it, the young and promising short story writer chronicles "the lives of Indians in exile, of people navigating between the strict tradition they have inherited and the baffling new world they must encounter every day." See: Jyoti Mishra, "Crisis in Human Values as Reflected in Jhumpa Lahiri's *Interpreter of Maladies*," *The Commonwealth Review* 10.2 (1998-99), p. 117-121. Indeed, in "When Mr. Pirzada Came to Dine," "Mrs. Sen's," and "The Third and Final Continent," the author throws light on the vulnerability and loneliness of recent first-generation immigrants who feel out of place in America. Yet, Lahiri's collection closes on a positive note. Taking stock of his life at about sixty-six, the unnamed narrator-character who

winner of the 2000 Pulitzer Prize, also invites comparison with *Sari of the Gods*. A shrewd and sensitive observer of the psyche as well as a witty storyteller, Chandra contributes, in his own way, to an emergent literary tradition – Indian immigrant writing.<sup>26</sup>

Besides, the author's gaze on his fellow citizens and his transnational fiction are also representative of multicultural American literature at large. Beyond their idiosyncrasies, and across cultural differences, his characters have much in common with those of other expatriate short story writers such as Dominican-born Junot Díaz, Haitian-American Edwidge Danticat, or Chinese-American Wang Ping, to name but a few.<sup>27</sup> For these authors, writing in, and about, exile is first and foremost a creative way of voicing their own sense of estrangement on American soil, as Chandra conceded in his interview with Vasudeva and Bahri: "I've tried very hard in the last three decades of my domicile to be part of this culture, but the mainstream doesn't really want us. So I deal with America as a surreal country where I wander aimlessly and invisibly."<sup>28</sup>

Today's debates on postcolonialism and globalization have led to a remapping of the world. Transnational migration and cultures in contact have furthered a new apprehension of space (be it geographical, national, cultural or linguistic). The immigrant's identity, determined by space, dislocation and relocation, the sense of home(lessness) and (un)belonging, tends to be problematic, at once unique and plural. Likewise, it is attempting the impossible to try to categorize the above-mentioned literary texts, especially along national lines. In *The Politics of Home*, Rosemary Marangoly George suggests associating these narratives with what she calls the "immigrant genre"<sup>29</sup> and states: "In these texts identity is linked only hypothetically (and through hyphenation) to a specific geographical place on the map. And yet, wandering at the margins of another's culture does not necessarily

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has come a long way, crossing three continents (India, Europe, and America), has eventually found a new home in America and looks back on the tortuous course of his life with some pride: "Still, there are times I am bewildered by each mile I have traveled" ("The Third and Final Continent," p. 198).

<sup>26</sup> In a literary survey, Gurleen Grewal pointed out that "Indian-American literature is among the very 'young' literatures in the United States, barely forty years old" (p. 91), and concluded that "[w]e can look forward to significant work by American-born generations, and, as the distinct identity of this literature becomes apparent, hopefully many more voices will be encouraged" (p. 105). See: Gurleen Grewal, "Indian-American Literature," in Alpana Sharma Knippling (ed.), *New Immigrant Literatures in the United States*, Westport, CT, Greenwood Press, 1996, p. 91-108.

<sup>27</sup> Junot Díaz's *Drown* (1996), Edwidge Danticat's *Krik? Krak!* (1995), and Wang Ping's *American Visa* (1994) are eclectic collections of short stories that traverse time and space, back and forth, following the lives of individuals living in-between two worlds, two cultures. "Fiesta, 1980" and "Negocios" (*Drown*), "New York Day Women" and "Caroline's Wedding" (*Krik? Krak!*), "American Visa" and "Subway Rhapsody" (*American Visa*) deal more particularly with first- and second-generation immigrants in New York City and Miami.

<sup>28</sup> Mary Vasudeva and Deepika Bahri, *op. cit.*, p. 9.

<sup>29</sup> Rosemary Marangoly George, *The Politics of Home: Postcolonial Relocations and Twentieth Century Fiction*, Cambridge, Cambridge UP, 1996, p. 171.

mean that one is marginal. Home in the immigrant genre is a fiction that one can move beyond or recreate at will.<sup>30</sup>

When asked whether he considered himself “an Indian, Anglo-Indian, or an American” writer,<sup>31</sup> Chandra answered “Indian” and “American,” adding wittily, “Call me anything you want if it brings attention to my work,”<sup>32</sup> thereby insisting on his artistic self that derives from and transcends his hybrid Indian American identity.

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<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 200.

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