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HOMEMAKING IN ASIAN AMERICAN WOMEN'S WRITING: CHUANG
HUA, BHARATI MUKHERJEE AND MEENA ALEXANDER
PERFORMING THE DIASPORIC HOME

by

Yan Jiang

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Advisor: Dr. Katherine Joslin, Ph.D.

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HOMEMAKING IN ASIAN AMERICAN WOMEN'S WRITING: CHUANG
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Yan Jiang, Ph.D.

Western Michigan University, 2009

This dissertation examines how homemaking, as depicted in contemporary Asian American literature, reflects the bigger issue of Asian diaspora and identity transformation. I analyze how Asian immigrants, especially Asian women, make the home in America in varying ways, seemingly following their ancestral pattern or the mainstream American model but eventually transcend both. Following Judith Butler, I suggest that Asian immigrants' homemaking is performative. In this study, I look to the ideas of cultural identification and identity formation as a foundation for contemporary definitions of the diasporic home and contend that far from being a static mimicking of their former homes, Asian migrants' homemaking is actually a dynamic process that comprises continual anxiety in relation to identity performance and transformation.

Employing the framework of Butler's performativity theory, each chapter explores the shifting conceptions of the home in Asian American literature of the latter half of the twentieth century. I examine how authors such as Chuang Hua, Bharati Mukherjee and Meena Alexander, after 1965, represent immigrant homemaking that transcends nationalism for survival and success in the host country. This method demonstrates how performances of the home, as depicted by these women writers, require a redefinition of

diasporic homemaking to include attributes hitherto under-explored in the literature, namely the complex and performative features of the home. Drawing on Asian American studies, diaspora scholarship and Butler's performativity theory, my dissertation proffers a fresh approach to Asian American texts that dismantles easy connections between homemaking and fixed identities and suggests a significant methodology for analyzing immigrant narratives.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Asian diaspora is a broad classification because it involves the dispersal of Asian populations from different cultures and nations, at different times, and for different reasons.¹ However, as these people make their trips across various borders, they all experience cultural interaction and a desire to make their home in the new land. Homemaking acts, therefore, are what they share after the diasporic journey. As a part of the global migration, Asian migrants have shown manners of homemaking that are both similar to and different from those of other migrants. Like diasporas from other continents, Asian migrants have left their homes and home countries for self-realization of some sort. Yet unlike the diasporic Jews who had lost a homeland and the later generations had to “re-conquer” before calling it home again, many Asian migrants have left behind an original home that is available to them. Also, unlike the African diaspora whose journeys are usually a political critique of the racism they have experienced during the diaspora, the home of Asian migrants does not necessarily have such a political dimension (although many of them have been victims of racial prejudice or immigration exclusion policies in some of the host countries such as the United States, Canada and Australia). Accordingly, Asian migrants’ identity, as is reflected in the various ways they construct and “perform” their homes, is complex and refuses essentialism.

This project centers on how Asian migrants make their home in the United States, a common destination of their diasporic journeys. My analysis of narratives by three contemporary Asian American women writers, Chuang Hua, Bharati Mukherjee and Meena Alexander, shows that Asian migrants vary in the manners of homemaking, ranging from reconstructing the original home to following the mainstream American pattern, from mixing the Asian and American models to creating a spiritual home in writing due to the sense of homelessness. These individuals' diverse acts add up to a general picture of Asian migrants' homemaking and contribute to our understanding of the complexity of Asian diaspora and identity transformation. While depicting the immigrants' various manners of home fashioning, these literary texts display a commonality: a performative feature of the diasporic home. Therefore, I find Butler's theory of gender performativity a useful tool for my discussion. Although gender identity and diasporic homemaking (and thereby cultural identity) are two distinct categories, the complex and flexible home patterns that immigrants have made in America are analogous to the flexibility and constructed nature of gender identities. Thus I believe Butler's theory of performativity can shed new light on immigrant homemaking and diaspora studies.

Asians are a recent immigrant group in the United States. As Shirley Geok-lin Lim points out in "Immigration and Diaspora" (1997), the major Asian immigration to America began in 1848 with the discovery of gold in California.² The earliest Asian immigrants were Chinese workers and farmers, who were followed shortly by the Japanese. Later, immigrants from other Asian countries made their ways to the United States, such as from India, Korea, Vietnam and the Philippines. There were a series of

U.S. laws to restrict Asian immigration, which began in 1882 with the exclusion of Chinese workers and gradually expanded to the restriction of all Asian immigrants in 1924 with the passage of the Asian Exclusion Act. During World War II, the wartime policy to turn China into an ally against Japan led the American government to repeal the Chinese Exclusion Act in 1943. However, it is only a small step toward correcting the “historic mistake” of Chinese (and Asian) exclusion because only 105 Chinese from around the world were permitted to immigrate to the United States each year.³

Eventually, Asian exclusion ended with the elimination of National Origins quota system in the Immigration Act of 1965. Since then, there has been an Asian American demographic explosion. As the 2004 Statistical Abstract of the U.S. shows,⁴ out of the 18 million or so immigrants around the world admitted to the U.S. since 1971, about 7.3 million of them were born in Asia, with the most coming from the Philippines, followed by China, then Vietnam and India.

The collective history of Asian exclusion in the United States has lumped together Asian immigrants under the title of Asian Americans. In view of such immigration history, diasporic homes (or communities) depicted in Asian American literature before 1965 were more or less uniform: they were either the product of racial discrimination and immigration restriction or a manifestation of cultural assimilation. In contrast, diasporic homes portrayed in Asian American writing after 1965 have displayed more variety and are more able to reveal the diversity and complexity of contemporary global diaspora, although some of the post-1965 writing has reflected the impact of these immigration laws on Asians. Accordingly, it is my goal to explore how the immigrants’ different

homemaking acts after 1965 reflect the Asian diaspora that is part of the contemporary globalization.

The literary texts I will discuss were all written after the repeal of Asian exclusion laws in 1965, that is, Chuang Hua's *Crossings* in 1968, Bharati Mukherjee's *Jasmine* in 1989, and Meena Alexander's *Fault Lines* in 1993 (I will also discuss her 2003 revision).

These works are all about the first-generation Asian immigrants' experiences. In

Crossings, for example, Chuang Hua depicts her characters' journeys from China to England, then to America. Alexander introduces in the memoir *Fault Lines* her own travels from India to Africa, then from England and India to the United States.

Mukherjee's characters immigrate from Asian countries such as India and Vietnam to America. In other words, these works are about the dispersion of Asians to other parts of the world, therefore are diasporic in nature and demonstrate a variety of homemaking acts. In contrast, those immigration narratives about the second or much later generations of Asians in America are more concerned with the immigrants' settled lives rather than with home-making. Although some of them do contain reflections of the earlier immigrants' lives, such as Fae Myenne Ng's *Bone* and Maxine Hong Kingston's *The Woman Warrior* and *China Men*, these episodes are mostly for the sake of exploring the identity problems that children of diaspora have. Therefore, these works are out of the scope of my study.

I have not chosen these literary texts on an ethnic basis. I will discuss works by one Chinese American writer (i.e. Chuang Hua's *Crossings*) and two Indian American writers (i.e. Mukherjee's *Jasmine* and Alexander's *Fault Lines*). My argument is that performances of the diasporic home are not defined by the migrants' ethnicity or nation

of origin; rather, they are informed by the various ways in which individuals perceive and construct their homes and cultural identities. The three pieces of writing I have chosen demonstrate Asian immigrants' diversified views and performances of the home due to various historical, social and personal reasons. Through their various homemaking acts, we can understand how migrants negotiate cultural differences and construct their cultural identities. From Fourth Jane in *Crossings*, for example, we catch a glimpse of those migrants who try hard to build an "authentic" home based on their original home model and cultural identity. The title character of *Jasmine* is an example of those immigrants who are eager to leave behind everything that is associated with their home culture and to embrace the new mainstream home pattern in the host country. For transnational subjects such as Meena Alexander who cannot get a sense of home anywhere during the diasporic journey, writing is what they finally resort to for solace and a spiritual "resting place." My attitude toward this issue is in accord with the view of prominent Asian American critic Shirley Geok-lin Lim about literary representations of Asian American experiences. Lim points out in "Feminist and Ethnic Literary Theories in Asian American Literature" (1993) that Asian American studies has become more inclusive and has authorized a "decreased emphasis on categorical national difference. The very multiplicity appears to result in a blurring of national boundaries and an assertion of organizational principles through commonalities of experience rather than difference of attributes" (578). Lim's emphasis on commonalities and blurring of national boundaries partly informs the focus of my project. In other words, I am not looking for specific national or ethnic patterns in these writers. Instead, I am interested in examining the various ways in which they write about diasporic homemaking.

These three texts are all by Asian American women. It may be more than something accidental though, if we look more deeply into the matter. Many critics and writers have observed that men and women in general experience space differently and hold different views about the meaning of home. According to Susan Roberson, the private spaces of the home and family “were and are still ... the spaces allotted to women” largely “because of constraints placed on them by patriarchy and their traditional roles as wives and mothers” (4-5). As Fereshteh Ahmadi Lewin argues, while men respond in a more uniform way and tend to see home as a symbol of “status and achievement,” women are more inclined to view home as “a protective shelter” or emotional retreat (148). Since quite a few writings on Asian diaspora either are autobiographical or contain autobiographical elements, such gender distinction of views about home may explain, at least in part, why a greater number of female writers have written more passionately about homes than their male counterparts.

Indeed, some Asian American men have dealt with “homes” in their works, but they either wrote to claim America as home for their ancestors and themselves, as in the case of Chinese American writer Shawn Wong in *Homebase* (1979), or focused on some aspects of home for purposes other than homemaking. Chinese Americans such as Frank Chin and Louis Chu, for example, depicted the dysfunctioning diasporic Chinese community as a result of U.S immigration laws. Chu’s *Eat a Bowl of Tea* (1961) is about the Chinese “bachelor society” produced by such discriminatory laws. In Chin’s case, he is concerned with showing, both in his plays and short stories, how decayed Chinatown life is and where its younger residents must escape for their own future development. Put differently, Chin is concerned with escaping from “home” rather than making the home.

Japanese American writer John Okada conveys a similar idea about the diasporic community in *No-No Boy* (1978) against the backdrop of World War II and the internment of Japanese immigrants. In Okada's description, the diasporic Japanese community mimics the original home in Japan, where the woman plays the role of cultural preserver (as is represented by Ichiro's mother) and inhibits men's Americanization. For Okada, Japanese young men must get away from the immigrant community for their own good. Thus those works by Asian American men have little to do with homemaking and are irrelevant to my current project.

Looking to the ideas of cultural affiliation and identity formation as foundation for contemporary definitions of diasporic homemaking, I contend that far from being static, Asian migrants' homemaking is actually a dynamic process that comprises continual anxiety in relation to identity performance and transformation. By examining how Asian American women such as Chuang Hua, Mukherjee and Alexander represent immigrant home construction (or performance in Butler's terms) after 1965 that transcend nationalism for survival and success in America,⁵ I hope to proffer a fresh approach to contemporary Asian American texts that dismantles easy connections between homemaking and fixed identities and suggests a significant methodology for analyzing immigrant narratives.

The Diasporic Home in Cultural Studies and Literary Criticism

Although the concept of diaspora is not new, "diaspora criticism" is a recent theoretical frame for social, historical and cultural analysis beginning in the 1990s, especially after the journal *Diaspora: A Journal of Transnational Studies* began

publication in 1991. Critical interest in the diasporic home, accordingly, grows as a part of diaspora criticism.

In the field of Asian American studies, the earliest discussion of diasporic homes appeared in a collection of essays on diaspora entitled *Asian Americans: Comparative and Global Perspectives* (1991), drawn mostly from papers presented at the sixth national conference of the Association for Asian American Studies held on June 1-3, 1989. As the theme of the conference, "Comparative and Global Perspectives of the Asian Diaspora," was to draw attention to the international dimensions of the Asian American experience, the essays in the collection discussed the major issues of diaspora, such as "questions of identity and identification, with attendant implications of a shared 'source,' heritage, or ethos, and the effects – historical, cultural, political – of dispersal" (266). Only two essays in the collection dealt with the immigrant home: Xin Liu's "The Founding and Development of the Palolo Chinese Home 1917-1988: A Case Study of Chinese Integration in Hawaii" (57-67) and Wendy L. Ng's "The Collective Memories of Communities" (103-12). Both articles are from a historical perspective and focus on the immigrants' communal home, with the first one on how Chinese immigrants in Palolo, Hawaii took care of their elderly members by establishing a home for the old, and the second one on how Japanese Americans' collective memory of internment during World War II plays a significant role in establishing individuals' sense of collective identification with the community. Scholarship on homes was still wanting in other aspects, such as literary and personal representations of homes.

Since its inception, Asian American scholarship on "homes" and cultural identity has been identified by important themes. Early scholarly interest in "homes" was about

“the home-seeking narrative” that prominent Asian American literary critic Sau-ling Cynthia Wong initiated in *Reading Asian American Literature: from Necessity to Extravagance* (1993). For Wong, Asian immigrants in the United States sought to make this adopted land their home, but the series of immigration laws made it difficult or even impossible for them to make a home and feel at home there. In this book she discusses the immigrants’ “keen collective awareness of immobility” and summarizes their “ambiguous and ambivalent relationship” to the American land as “simultaneous home” and “not home” (123-24).

Many scholars follow Wong’s home-seeking approach and discuss how early Chinese immigrants were silenced and denied rights in their adopted land, as is shown in various literary and legal texts. Peter Kvidera suggests that writing is an important way through which some Chinese American writers such as Shawn Wong claim America as home for both their ancestors and themselves.⁶ Yu-fang Cho employs Wong’s approach of the immigrant immobility for the discussion of the diasporic homemaking. Cho argues that in the migrant’s journey “mobility is always already haunted by immobility, freedom to move by the threat of imprisonment, and open landscape by enclosure” (160);⁷ therefore the diasporic home is either disrupted or reduced to “a close space” by various political and historical forces in China and the United States. Put in another way, Cho delineates a homeless migrant throughout her whole journey of diaspora and regards home for her as impossible or unattainable.

Some other scholars focus on the general question of identity transformation in the diaspora. A leading critic in this respect is Amy Ling who, in *Between Worlds: Woman Writers of Chinese Ancestry* (1990), maintains that Chinese American writers are caught

between Chinese and American cultures and feel a sense of alienation from both. She describes immigrants' and immigrant writers' identity dilemma as a kind of "double consciousness" and calls it the "feeling of being between worlds, totally at home nowhere" (105). Ling's "between-world" view of the diasporic identity has been applauded by many Asian American scholars.⁸ I believe that Ling's formulation of the "between-world" consciousness can be applied to many diasporic individuals. However, I would further argue that diaspora consciousness is more complex than the "between-world" consciousness because migrants and migrant writers may have various cultural identifications. As a result, not all of them are caught "between worlds."

Lisa Lowe is another key figure in Asian American literary criticism who has formulated an important critical approach about Asian American identity. In *Immigrant Acts: On Asian American Cultural Politics* (1996) Lowe argues that Asian American identity and culture are "contested and unsettled ... taking place in the movement between sites and in the strategic occupation of heterogeneous and multiple positions" (82). Lowe's articulation of "heterogeneous and multiple positions," against the backdrop of U.S. Asian exclusion laws and Asian immigrants' different attitudes towards their cultural heritage and U.S. immigration policies, encapsulates the various strategies and methods that Asian American critics have employed to define Asian American identity and literature. Such an acknowledgment of multiple positions, I believe, is also appropriate in understanding Asian migrants' homemaking in the host country.

Lowe's approach to Asian American identity can be regarded as a specific example of diaspora identity formulated by cultural critic Stuart Hall. Hall introduces in "Cultural Identity and Diaspora" (1990) two understandings of cultural identity: 1) a stable identity

that people normally acquire if they live within the same cultural milieu for a long period; 2) migrants' identities that "undergo constant transformation" as a result of the clash between cultures (225). For Hall, diaspora identities should be viewed as "a matter of 'becoming' as well as of 'being'" because they "are subject to the continuous 'play' of history, culture and power" (225). Lowe's and Hall's formulations of identities are seminal for understanding diaspora in general and Asian diaspora in particular.

Although cultural identity has long been a focus in Asian diaspora/immigration scholarship, few scholars associated the discussion of home directly with the reconfiguration of diaspora identity until Helena Grice's chapter "Homes and Homecomings" in *Negotiating Identities: An Introduction to Asian American Women's Writing* (2002). Grice introduces various understandings of the concept of home in recent literary works. Believing that space "defines people and people define space" (200), she discusses various representations of home and homeland by migrant writers of different generations, such as home being "where you belong" but often unattainable for migrants, home as "an imagined place" for postcolonial immigrants, the desire to make the adopted country as a home for writers who have grown up there, the ancestral homeland being "a mythologised location" for the "grandchildren of immigrants" who have never visited it, the idea of the homeplace as a refuge "from the destructive effects of racism," and the house as a "patriarchal place" and "gendered zones" (203). In general, Grice has given a broad sketch of the home in her chapter, a scope that is valuable for my project. Helpful also is her approach to incorporating home into the discussion of identity transformation.

In addition to the approaches to home that Grice has introduced in her book, discussions about homes have taken other directions, in which homes are associated with

discussion of the family and the quotidian objects. Meena Alexander discusses in “Diasporic Writing: Recasting Kinship in a Fragmented World” (2000) the significance of kinship ties in her own migrant experiences as well as in her writing about diaspora. She thinks that kinship offers “anchorage” for “the seeking self” (21). Her argument is illuminating although it may not be applicable to some migrants who are determined to sever the kinship ties and seek a new start far away from their original home. In “Mediating Worlds, Migrating Identities: Representing Home, Diaspora and identity in Recent Asian American and Asian Canadian Women’s Films” (2000), Eva Rueschmann elaborates on how “fragments and quotidian objects,” such as an heirloom, a souvenir or a mass-manufactured article, may “encode forgotten collective and family memories” (187). Her discussion offers another channel, namely the material culture approach, through which we may interpret diaspora, home and cultural identity. As Rueschmann explains, “objects that travel along paths of human diaspora and international trade encode cultural displacement” (187). Such an approach is revealing about the identity transformation of diasporic individuals and their children.

The diasporic home is also an important focus in gender studies. In “Gender and the Image of Home in the Asian American Diaspora: A Socio-Literary Reading of Some Asian American Works” (1994), Rajini Srikanth explores gender relations within the diasporic home and the complex “strategies that men and women employ to make themselves ‘feel at home’” in a new environment (149). Srikanth argues that the diasporic home “is increasingly identified with the woman” because for the diasporic male (namely the husband), the woman is responsible for recreating “the idyllic home in the new destination, whether or not this idyll can ever become reality”; for the diasporic woman

(as wife), on the other hand, “the expectation that she will recreate the lost home sets up a situation that both empowers and debilitates her” in maintaining the traditional values of the original home country in a diaspora setting (151). What Srikanth’s appealing argument fails to consider, however, is the possibility that diasporic men and women may want to sever their bond with their original home and home culture in their eagerness to assimilate and be accepted into the mainstream culture of the host society.

As homemaking is generally regarded as women’s work, a collection of essays in *Homemaking: Women Writers and the Politics and Poetics of Home* (1996) makes use of such a correlation to offer a feminist critique of “home” as at once a private and public domain, and argues that home “can be re-made” (x). As *Homemaking* brings together voices from many different nations and communities, Cynthia F. Wong’s “Remembering China in *Wild Swans* and *Life and Death in Shanghai*” is the only piece in the collection about Asian diaspora (115-33). Wong contends that the Chinese immigrants are bound to their origins and “finally are unable to completely break from her [Chinese] ties” (129). With the emphasis that such connection to the homeland is the only means for Chinese migrant writers to find “their true homes, their true selves” (129), Wong argues convincingly that diasporic individuals can never be free from “the psychological burden that their homeland exerts on their remembered experiences” even though they are enjoying political and literary freedom in their adopted homes in the west (116). Such an approach to home reveals the relationship between the home and cultural identity, which is especially the case with immigrants.⁹

The notion of home has also been a thematic interest in postcolonial studies. In *The Politics of Home: Postcolonial Relations and Twentieth-century Fiction* (1996),

Rosemary Marangoly George provides inter-related readings of the works of "first-world" and "third-world" writers and theorists, including Joseph Conrad, Kazuo Ishiguro, Anita Desai, Edward Said and Homi Bhabha, in exploration of the problems, pleasures and privileges involved in "feeling at home" in literature. George states in Chapter Six "Traveling light": Home and the Immigrant Genre" that immigrants in the postcolonial age have to "come to terms with the spiritual, material and even linguistic luggage they carry or inherit" (173). To be at home in foreign places, according to George, "requires a judicious balancing of remembrance and forgetting" (197). Thus she declares that "Home in the immigrant genre is a fiction that one can move beyond or recreate at will" (200). Although George mainly focuses on the ways of dealing with memory and the past in order for immigrants to create a new home in a new land, and little attention is given to the interaction between immigrants and their host society, she has made insightful statements about the invented or fictional feature of immigrant home and about the intersection of postcolonial studies and diaspora studies.

The only book so far devoted to the discussion of homes for migrants is a collection of essays edited by Geoffrey Kain: *Ideas of Home: Literature of Asian Migration* (1997). It is considered a significant work in this regard in Asian American literature. This collection has as its goal a reconsideration or "redefinition" of the ancient experience of migration in the contemporary world as well as a discussion of "a complex of factors" to be resolved before the new place "may be sincerely embraced as 'home'" (1). Although Asian American writers discussed in this book range from first- to third-generation immigrants, and terms such as "migration", "immigration" and "exile" are frequently used in this collection while the notion of "diaspora" is not mentioned even once, the

first-generation immigrant experiences are diasporic in nature and therefore discussions about them are very helpful to my project. The numerous essays have shed light on the impact of diaspora and promoted a deep understanding of the feature of home, such as the essays about the impact of the past on immigrants' understanding of their cultural identity and about the exilic experiences of postcolonial subjects that render them homeless (due to the disappearance of native culture as a result of the cultural invasion of the West). However, this book is not yet a systematic study of diaspora and of homes that are constructed after such a journey.

Benzi Zhang's "The Politics of Re-homing: Asian Diaspora Poetry in Canada" (2004) is a useful article about the theme of home. Zhang made substantial theoretical discussion of diasporic individuals' desire for home and their complex strategies to negotiate the meaning of home "between fact and fantasy" (106). Although textual support for his arguments seems ornamental and little has been done to elaborate on the interaction between diasporic individuals and the new environment, Zhang's analysis is helpful in understanding the complex situation of diaspora and homemaking as well as the complex consciousness of those people involved in it.

In Asian American criticism, performances are linked primarily to cultural identity. Many scholars regard performances as a strategy that immigrants have to adopt in their identity transformation. One view is that immigrants simply perform their ethnicity as is expected of them. Robert Ji-Song Ku, for example, conveys such a view in "'Beware of Tourist if You Look Chinese' and Other Survival Tactics in the American Theatre: The Asian(cy) of Display in Frank Chin's *The Year of the Dragon*" (1999). Ku argues that Chinese immigrants perform the "model minority" expected of or imposed upon them by

mainstream American society (78). Similarly, Chih-ming Wang describes, in “‘An Onstage Costume Change’: Modernity and Immigrant Experience in Gish Jen’s *Typical American*” (2002), immigrants following western fashions in their willingness to assimilate (71). Another view about identity performance is that Asian immigrants display a dual identity or double consciousness in their role plays. For Erika T. Lin, such a dual identity means performing an Asian American identity that is expected of them in the public sphere (as a “model minority” for example) but switch to a different role dictated by their ancestral culture in the domestic sphere (“Mona on the Phone,” 2003). In *Double Agency: Acts of Impersonation in Asian American Literature and Culture* (2005), Tina Chen argues that Asian Americans are “double agents” because their identity performances “work both to establish their own claims to a U.S. American identity and to critique the American institutions that have designated them as ‘aliens’ whose incorporation into the body politic is thus always already suspect” (8).¹⁰

Thus, while they are aware of the importance of performance over authenticity in cultural identity, Asian American scholars have not associated performances with diasporic homemaking. However, Wendy W. Walters has explored such a correlation in literary texts by black diasporic writers. In *At Home in Diaspora: Black International Writing* (2005), Walters argues that black diasporic writers’ desire to claim a home “occurs in the language of literary narrative as a direct result of experiencing racial exclusions ‘at home’” (xvi). She turns briefly to Judith Butler’s theory of the performative gendered body in *Gender Trouble* (1990) as the basis for her performance of “Africanness” and of the home in literary narratives. As Walters argues,

the gendered body can be seen as performative, since “it has no ontological

status apart from the various acts which constitute its reality” (136). This is similar to what I am claiming about the nature of diaspora identification, in that there need not be an ontological “Africanness” to which a diasporic identification refers. And yet, conversely, the desire to claim a home occurs in the language of literary narrative as a direct result of experiencing racial exclusions “at home.” (xvii)

Walters contends that discourse, especially literary production, is “an important realm” of the “enacted space in which one’s relationship to home or not-home is constructed, negotiated, and repeatedly revised” (xvi-xvii). She associates performances with literary representations of home and suggests that black diasporic writers’ literary visions are informed by a political critique of “home.” Following her approach, I will demonstrate that Asian migrants’ homemaking is also performative. But I would further argue that Asian migrants’ performances of the home are not necessarily an outright political critique because not all Asian American writers use their writing as weapons to attack the racism they or their fictional characters have experienced in diaspora. Meena Alexander resembles the black diasporic writers in *Fault Lines* in her critique of racism, for example, but Chuang Hua and Bharati Mukherjee both sidestepped the issue of racial discrimination in their fiction.

To sum up, scholarship on the diasporic home in Asian American literature has been scattered. There has been little systematic analysis of diasporic homemaking. Neither is there much discussion about the performative feature of diasporic homes. It is my argument that we can gain new insight into diaspora by combining these two perspectives. This project, thereby, explores the various manifestations of diasporic home

performances. The value of such a study lies partly in assigning a common feature to the diverse and complex diasporic homemaking acts, that is, a performative feature of home construction that is either neglected or under-explored in previous critical works. Such an approach also contributes to the literary conversation about cultural identity and sheds new light on the understanding of immigrants' identity transformation, as is demonstrated in their homemaking acts.

The Concept of Diaspora

The word "diaspora" has been used for centuries. Historically, it referred to the banishment and dispersion of Jewish people from their homeland. However, as Ronald Skeldon points out, recently the term "diaspora" has been adopted by cultural theorists in migration discourse, and it now includes the international dispersal of other groups (51). To be more specific, "diaspora" has been used in a broad sense since *Diaspora: A Journal of Transnational Studies* began publication in 1991, which marks the inception of diaspora criticism. According to cultural studies critics such as Avtar Brah, Laurence Ma and Ronald Skeldon, diasporic peoples may leave their native places because of political strife (such as Sri Lankans and Bosnian Muslims), slavery (as has been the experience of African slaves), conflict and war (such as Palestinians), or as part of global flows of labor (as in the cases of Asians and Cypriots). As Shuyu Kong puts it in "Diaspora Literature" (2003), now in an age of increasing globalization "diaspora" may involve people of any race or nation and include "the modern condition and experience of transnational and intercultural dispersal" either for personal or external reasons (546).

Cultural studies scholars such as Khachig Tololyan, Ma and Skeldon note that because of its frequent use since the 1990s, the term “diaspora” has almost replaced the word “migration”. In *Writing Diaspora* (1993) Rey Chow associates diasporic conditions with subject positions of migrancy, especially those positions produced by some cultural practices of globalization (such as cosmopolitan intellectuals and transnational workers). In *Questions of Travel: Postmodern Discourse of Displacement* (1996), however, Caren Kaplan draws a line between diasporic and immigrant positions by stating that “immigrants are seen to replace one nationalist identification for another while diasporic émigrés confound territorial and essentialist nationalisms in favor of transnational subjectivities and communities” (136).

In literary criticism since the 1990s, most scholars have used “diaspora” interchangeably with “migration” and “immigration” without offering explanation. Even when prominent Asian American critic Shirley Geok-lin Lim, in “Immigration and Diaspora” (1997), makes a distinction between reading Asian American writing as immigrant writing and as diasporic writing, she has in mind the shift in perspective of seeing the same thing. She points out that the recent shift in addressing Asian American works as diasporic writing rather than as immigrant writing “carries ideological, political, and institutional consequences” because diasporic writing is often seen as “falling outside U.S. canonical work” (291). According to Lim, immigrant writing refers to “writing produced by U.S. writers of Asian descent” while diasporic writing is “writing produced by members of a diasporic group” – the Chinese, South Asian, or Filipino diasporas, for example. Thus she concludes, but without further elaboration, that “in an international

perspective, paradigms of diaspora will tend to overlap, destabilize, or supersede paradigms of immigration” (291).

While I agree with the view that “diaspora” can be used almost interchangeably with “migration,” I side with some Asian American scholars in drawing a line between diaspora and immigration. I would suggest that diaspora is a broader term than immigration, or diaspora incorporates immigration, partly because members of diaspora may or may not settle down in a specific host country, while immigrants determine to and will strike root in the adopted land. As a result, an immigrant will replace one nationalist identification for another, while a migrant may embrace more than one national or cultural subjectivity (or none at all due to their numerous journeys across different national borders). It follows that once diasporic individuals settle down in a new place and make it the final destination, they may be called immigrants.

The texts I am going to discuss are selected according to the above distinction: they are about the diasporic experiences of the first-generation Asian Americans who left their original home in Asia, crossed various geographical and cultural borders to Europe and Africa, finally made their way to the United States. To put it differently, these people’s experiences are interpreted according to the broader concept of “diaspora”.

The Concept of Home

There has been no consensus on the meaning of “home.” Of course home is where one lives and belongs, but writers and critics often move beyond the dwelling and relate the sense of home to self and identity. As sociologists Habib Chaudhury and Graham Rowles state in “Between the Shores of Recollection and Imagination: Self, Aging, and

Home” (2005), “It is generally accepted that home provides a sense of identity, a locus of security, and a point of centering and orientation in relation to a chaotic world beyond the threshold” (3). They go on to point out that “a sense of being ‘at home’ is related to health status and well-being and ... disruption of this sense, through *in situ* environmental change, relocation, or through disruption of a more existential sense of being at one with the world, can result in significant changes in well-being” (3-4).

Diaspora impacts one’s understanding of home on various levels. It not only uproots migrants from their original residence and home country, but also disrupts their sense of home and sense of being at home at various places. During diaspora and the subsequent settling down process in a new country, migrants’ sense of home has experienced disruption, reconstruction and change. Chances are different migrants may arrive at different understandings of the home after the life-changing journey. Some of them may seek to reconstruct the image of the original home they carry in their minds; some may desire a different psychological, social and cultural security in a new home they have made in the adopted land. Furthermore, migrants’ sense of home is likely to change with time, especially after their cultural assimilation. Therefore, as Catherine Wiley observes in the introduction of *Homemaking: Women Writers and the Politics and Poetics of Home* (1996), the concept of home is “a fertile site of contradictions demanding constant renegotiation and reconstruction” (XV).¹¹

Accordingly, the “home” I will discuss in this project is a multi-layered concept. As depicted in Asian American diaspora writing, home is not necessarily a physical space. It is often a symbolic construct in terms of memories and longings. As home inevitably involves family and community, the social aspect of home is also included in

my discussion. Therefore, I will explore the physical, social and psychological aspects of the home. While “home” usually refers to the home that migrants make (or hope to make) after diaspora, it sometimes also indicates the original home in these individuals’ home country or even means their homeland itself. In this project, I use this term to refer to migrants’ diasporic home unless it is stated otherwise.

The Theory of Performativity and the Diasporic Home

“Performativity” is a theory that Judith Butler formulates to characterize gender identity. In exploring the representation of various homes that migrants have constructed in some Asian American literary works, I find that its complexity can be well explained by applying Butler’s theory of gender performativity. My argument is that diasporic homemaking resembles gender constitution in its performative feature, although these two are different in categories.

In “Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory”(1990), Butler elaborated on the performative approach to gender identity that she initiated in *Gender Trouble* (1989). According to Butler, reified and naturalized conceptions of gender “might be understood as constituted and, hence, capable of being constituted differently” (271). She contends that gender is “instituted through the stylization of the body and, hence, must be understood as the mundane way in which bodily gestures, movements, and enactments of various kinds constitute the illusion of an abiding gendered self” (270).

Like gender, the diasporic home is not a naturalized phenomenon or identity, either. Just as gender is instituted through bodily movements and enactments of various

kinds, so the diasporic home is constructed and can also be constructed in different ways. The home, or any home, must be actualized through a variety of domestic activities in order to create an established space of shelter and security. In addition, the home is generally understood as an identity created through habitual acts of individual members and through repetition of rituals and customs of a particular culture. The ordinary home in any country and culture seems naturalized because of the stable social and cultural environments, therefore its performative feature is implicit. The diasporic home, in contrast, is made in a different cultural milieu. Its performative feature surfaces from the very beginning of construction. Migrants' various constructing acts of the home (due to different personal and cultural backgrounds) result in a diversity of home patterns, and these patterns may change with time. Therefore, I suggest that the diasporic home is a site where we can observe migrants' homemaking performances and see how they constitute their cultural identity.

Furthermore, Butler maintains in "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution" that the gendered body is a "historical situation" rather than a natural species "both conditioned and circumscribed by historical convention" (272). In other words, the body is "a manner of doing, dramatizing, and reproducing a historical situation" (272). For Butler, this "doing of gender" manifests a set of strategies or a style of being. But she cautions that this style is "never fully self-styled, for living styles have a history, and that history conditions and limits possibilities" (272).

The idea of home for those in diaspora can be analyzed along similar lines. We may argue that diasporic homes are also a historical idea in view of various historical circumstances where migrants are situated during their diasporic journeys. In some of the

receiving countries migrants' individual and communal homemaking may be subject to limited possibilities as a result of harsh immigration restriction during some specific historical periods. The home constructed in such a way (especially from social and psychological perspectives), therefore, reflects various survival strategies and living styles in migrants' specific stopping places or host countries. We may name it, after Butler, the "doing of home." Admittedly, such doing of home can never be fully self-styled because it is limited by historical conditions and restrictions. Therefore, like gender configuration, diasporic homemaking is similarly compelled by social sanction and, occasionally, by taboo.

When Butler initiates the idea that gender attributes and acts are performative, she means that gender is fluid rather than being a biologically innate or stable fact, and "there is no preexisting identity by which an act or attribute might be measured," so she asserts "there would be no true or false, real or distorted acts of gender" (*Gender Trouble* 180). Butler argues "the postulation of a true gender identity would be revealed as a regulatory fiction" (*Gender Trouble* 180). As she observes, one is compelled to live in a world in which gender is stabilized, polarized, rendered discrete and intractable. For her, gender is actually made to comply with a model of truth and falsity which not only contradicts its own performative fluidity, but serves a social policy of gender regulation and control. Hence she contends that gender acts, as social actions, are a shared experience and collective action, and these acts are repeated in that they are at once a reenactment and re-experiencing of a set of meanings already socially established (*Gender Trouble* 180).

Many Asian American literary works indicate that migrants from the same Asian country or culture tend to enact similar patterns of homemaking, in particular the patterns

they were used to in their original culture. Many migrants' homemaking acts, therefore, are collective actions that reenact and re-experience certain socially established meanings. On the other hand, the diverse cultural backgrounds and personal experiences of Asian migrants (including migrant writers) result in various manifestations of the homing acts, not necessarily following the home models in their original cultures. Some may prefer the home pattern of mainstream western culture. To put it differently, what these Asian migrants do share in their home construction is a performative feature; that is, there is a fluidity in what models they may follow in the homemaking and to what extent.

Admittedly, some social regulations do exist in the host countries that limit the flexibility of migrants' home performances. For example, Asians in America are put under the umbrella term of "Asian Americans" because they have all been subject to a set of Asian exclusion laws. Therefore, for a long time in American history Asian homemaking was not as fluid as the homemaking of immigrants from other parts of the world, such as Europe. But the desire to assimilate and the compulsion to conform force many Asians to hide or abandon their performances of the original home pattern. Thus the coexistence of two opposite tendencies in diasporic home homemaking (to keep the original home pattern and to follow the mainstream model) adds to the complexity of migrants' home performances.

In spite of some similarities in performativity, home performances differ from gender performances in that the former does not necessarily incur punitive consequences if migrants end up performing a home different from the mainstream one. Chances are migrants might long for a home identical to the ones created by members of the

mainstream society but find themselves deprived of such rights, or sometimes they construct a home quite different from the mainstream pattern only because of the encouragement of or restriction by the mainstream society.

Therefore, migrants' repeated acts of homemaking, diversified and yet limited by historical conditions and social regulations, are similar to gender constitution in their performative feature. Following Butler, I call migrants' homemaking acts the "performances" of the home. Analyzing Asian Americans' home construction from the performative approach can shed new light on Asian diaspora and Asian migrants' identity transformation.

Chapter Introductions

Looking to the ideas of cultural identification and identity transformation as a foundation for contemporary definitions of diasporic homemaking, I suggest that far from being a static mimicking of their former homes, Asian migrants' homemaking is actually a dynamic process that comprises continual anxiety in relation to identity performance and transformation. By examining how authors such as Chuang Hua, Bharati Mukherjee and Meena Alexander represent migrant home performances after 1965 that transcend nationalism for survival and success in America, I hope to proffer a fresh approach to Asian American texts that dismantles easy connections between homemaking and fixed identities and suggests a significant methodology for analyzing immigrant narratives.

There are three more chapters in this project, each of which is devoted to discussing one Asian American woman writer in relation to the variety and complexity of home performances as a way to reflect migrants' identity transformation. In Chapter Two, "The

'Authentic' Home in Chuang Hua's *Crossings*," I discuss how the home in Chuang Hua's work is performed in a way that it is based upon a cherished home model in the past. To some migrants such as the narrator Fourth Jane in *Crossings*, the only authentic home is the one that mimics the home pattern in their original country. Such performances of the home are partly the product of immigrants' nostalgia and partly due to some unhappy experiences they have had in the host country. However, in time most, if not all, migrants may come to a painful realization that their performed "authentic" home model will inevitably be replaced by a mixed pattern that better suits the life situation in the adopted land. Such a transition, as Fourth Jane has experienced, is a testimony of immigrant identity transformation. Chapter Three, "Performing (Un)desirable Homes in Bharati Mukherjee's *Jasmine*," discusses Mukherjee's account of her title character's resolute denial of the original home and home culture and her conscious homemaking based on mainstream American model as enactment for survival and self-fulfillment. Much like the fluidity of gender performances, Jasmine's diasporic home keeps changing and is informed by American spirit instead of being ethnically "authentic" and static against change. However, Jasmine is not merely an assimilationist in her hurry to become American. Instead, she appropriates the American home model for her own benefit and in so doing she is revising the mainstream home pattern in America. In Chapter Four, "Writing as Dwelling: Meena Alexander's *Fault Lines*," I analyze the idealized home Meena Alexander constructs in writing. Unlike the home performances delineated in Chuang Hua's and Mukherjee's works, Alexander does not depict the home based on concrete models offered by either the ancestral country or the host country. Rather, she is concerned with the sense of being at home and declares that she cannot find a home

anywhere. Accordingly, she performs a home in a different sphere, namely a home “constructed” in writing. Alexander’s “homemaking” gesture is political and spiritual, aiming at exposing her diasporic consciousness and some unpleasant experiences she has had as a migrant. Such a performative approach attests to the way Alexander, as a writer and migrant, views the impact of diaspora on her subjectivity.

Indeed, the performances of the home in these three pieces of writing are merely personal experiences of different kinds, but they do reveal some major patterns of immigrant homemaking and engage multiple perspectives on diaspora, in this case, on Asian diaspora. They have shown, for example, how different interactions between Asian and American influences may present themselves in immigrant identity transformation. Due to different cultural, social and class backgrounds and distinct personal experiences, the female protagonists in these narratives interpret in various ways the role that their cultural heritage plays in their homemaking in the new world. These texts also demonstrate that immigrants all actively engage with the status quo of American culture in their assimilation and homemaking, either by enjoying the multicultural American life or by embracing whole-heartedly American culture and American home model and breaking with their heritage culture. Through these multiple and complex representations, we can see immigrants’ cultural identity in the making. Taken together, however, these narratives are far from a portrayal of Asian immigrants’ collective identity and community building. Rather, these authors depict individuals’ various strategies for their homemaking and identity transformation. Indeed, we cannot separate narratives of the immigrant self from the community and ethnicity. But there is not a single pattern of identity formation and homemaking that is applicable to an entire

ethnic community or a whole ethnic group. These three writers address or call our attention to this problem in distinct ways. Therefore, acknowledgment of both the common features and diversity of immigrants' home performances has much to offer to the discussion and understanding of Asian diaspora.

Furthermore, we cannot ignore the literary value of these three texts. As main figures in Asian American literature, these authors have made creative use of the specific genres, or even challenge literary conventions, not only to suit their subject matter and reveal the impact of diaspora on the sense of self, but also, like their respective literary characters, seek a place in and at the same times expand the literary canon of America. One of the pioneering texts in Asian American literature, Chuang Hua's *Crossings* is characterized by modernist techniques. In particular, she makes skillful use of stream of consciousness and structures the novel with two parallel story lines, one for the present and the other for the various times in the past. The effect of such a technique is a fragmented narrative (on sentence, paragraph and chapter levels) that serves well to reflect the protagonist's diasporic psychology and her painful quest for the self. Thus *Crossings* is a salient example of diaspora writing. Unlike Chuang Hua who is a migrant and has produced a diaspora text, Mukherjee defines herself and expects to be defined as an American writer. Mukherjee's writing, therefore, is her active engagement with American literary tradition. In *Jasmine*, she writes consciously in dialogue with patterns such as the classic American success story and the traditional female bildungsroman. Mukherjee's narrative resembles these patterns but eventually subverts them. Her protagonist's success, for example, is not measured by money but by identity transformation via romance; her maturation does not end in a happy marriage but is

marked instead by the escape from her home for adventure and individual freedom. In doing so, Mukherjee aims to expand the American literary canon to include immigrant subjects. Distinct from both Chuang Hua and Mukherjee, Alexander is a genre subversive. Her memoir *Fault Lines* is a case in point of her subversive strategies. She has made some generic experiments in self-representation in her memoir. As Theresa Kulbaga argues, experimental autobiographies by writers such as Alexander must be read not as a mode of postmodernist “play” but as cultural responses to uneven material histories and development because “‘border crossing’ for these authors names a contemporary process fraught with risks and burdens that, when inscribed autobiographically, confronts the problem of citizenship at the level of genre” (2781). Along similar lines, *Fault Lines* is Alexander’s creative response to her diasporic experience and the sense of dislocation in the receiving nations.

In these complex ways, the three women writers represent various attitudes towards and distinct manners of homemaking by Asian immigrants. With the implication that we can never essentialize in diaspora/immigration studies, we also see that performativity can be a useful approach to enhancing our understanding of diaspora and diasporic homemaking.

Endnotes

¹ Since Asian diaspora is such a broad scope, there have been no generalized scholarly works on it. Scholarship has been scattered on regional Asian diasporas, such as on Chinese diaspora and south Asian diaspora.

² See Shirley Geok-lin Lim, "Immigration and Diaspora." *An Interethnic Companion to Asian American Literature*. Ed. King-kok Cheung. New York: Cambridge U P, 1997. 293. 289-311.

³ Those words were by Franklin D. Roosevelt for consideration of the American wartime goals against Japan during World War II. In a letter to Congress, Roosevelt wrote that passing the bill to repeal was vital to correcting the "historic mistake" of Chinese exclusion, and he emphasized that the legislation was "important in the cause of winning the war and of establishing a secure peace." See "Repeal of the Chinese Exclusion Act, 1943."

⁴ "The 1965 Immigration Act."

⁵ The year 1965 is significant for Asian immigrants because the Immigration Act of 1965 abolished "national origin" quotas and specified seven preferences for Eastern Hemisphere quota immigrants. Since 1965, there has been an Asian American demographic explosion. Two million Asian quota immigrants, two million nonquota immigrants, and one million refugees outside the seventh preference have arrived in the United States. See "History of Migration and Immigration Laws in the United States."

⁶ Shawn Wong, *Homebase*. New York: A Plume Book, 1979.

⁷ Yu-fang Cho, "Rewriting Exile, Remapping Empire, Re-membering Home: Hualing Nieh's *Mulberry and Peach*." *Meridians: Feminism, Race, Transnationalism*. 5 (1) (2004): 157-200.

⁸ Li Zeng, "Diasporic self, cultural other: Negotiating Ethnicity Through Transformation in the Fiction of Tan and Kingston" (2003).

⁹ One's view about the home is related to one's cultural identity. When immigrants undergo identity transformation in a new country and new culture, their understanding of the home inevitably experiences change of different degrees that corresponds with their transformed identity. For more information please consult Stuart Hall (1999) and Lisa Lowe (2003).

¹⁰ Erika T. Lin, 2003; Tina Chen, 2005.

¹¹ For more details about Catherine Wiley, visit "Colorado Poet Center" <http://www.unco.edu/colopoets/poets/wiley_catherine>.

CHAPTER II

THE “AUTHENTIC” HOME IN CHUANG HUA’S *CROSSINGS*

Grandfather practices calisthenics. In the yard of his former gate keeper’s house he makes studied movements of limbs and body... He retreats, advances, and with each change of movement he inhales and exhales. The air comes out of his mouth in puffs of vapor which dissolve in the morning air.

– Chuang Hua, *Crossings*

This chapter analyzes how the characters in Chuang Hua’s *Crossings*, especially the protagonist Fourth Jane, perform the home in a way that it is based primarily upon a cherished home model in the past so that they can maintain the cultural identity that existed before the diaspora. To be specific, these migrants try to cling to their Chineseness, names and food, personal relations and customs, to name a few. Chang Hua implies in *Crossings* that her Chinese characters construct their diasporic home as a natural extension of the original home in China. The scant scholarship on *Crossings* also follows this line of thinking.¹ I would suggest, however, such diasporic homemaking unconsciously emerges as a kind of performance. Joining together Butler’s theory of performativity and Stuart Hall’s theory of diaspora identity (which I will discuss in this chapter), I argue that migrants’ homemaking is a process of performing and negotiating cultural identity, even when it appears to reconstruct some authentic or original version of the home.

Diaspora has deprived migrants of a stable sense of home and self. In order to regain their lost identity, many diasporic individuals go back to their places of origin, if conditions permit; or if they cannot, they will try, by all means, to reconstruct or recreate in the adopted land a home that resembles the original one. This seemingly “natural” act of reconstructing the home is actually a performative act, either in life or in art forms, or in both, to satisfy “the endless desire to return to ‘lost origins’, ...to go back to the beginning” (Hall 236). Such anxious quests are determined by the cultural identity that many diasporic individuals have formed before their travel. Accordingly, in their effort to reconstruct a Chinese home, *Chuang Hua*’s characters are actually putting their Chinese identity on display.

It follows that diasporic homemakers may reject the intrusion of any outside influence upon their performed home in the hope of keeping their cultural heritage intact. Such a conservative version of the diasporic home is partly the product of immigrants’ nostalgia. On the other hand, it reveals that identity transformation is a slow and painful process. This is especially true for the first-generation immigrants, but excluded from this picture are those who have had some traumatic experience in their original country and are eager to forget anything associated with the past once they have fled elsewhere. However, in time most, if not all, migrants may come to a painful realization that their performed “authentic” home cannot last forever and will inevitably be replaced by a hybrid pattern that better suits their life situation in the adopted land. I suggest that this is a common trajectory of immigrant homemaking and identity transformation that *Crossings* has unfolded to readers. As we learn, the “authentic” Chinese home *Chuang Hua*’s migrants have performed subsequently undergoes a significant structural change

with a new family member coming from outside the Chinese community. In other words, these migrants have performed the home unwittingly in a manner that gradually moves away from the original Chinese pattern and toward the mainstream western one that is more appropriate for their life in America. The changed home pattern mirrors how migrants perform and negotiate their cultural identity in the adopted country.

We know little about the personal life of the Chinese American writer Chuang Hua because of her insistence on remaining unidentified. She now lives in New York City and refuses to have any interviews.² *Crossings*, her only known literary work, is regarded as one of the pioneering texts in Chinese American literature (as well as Asian American literature) for its modernist style. An autobiographical novel, *Crossings* was published in 1968 but was neglected and soon went out of print. Amy Ling, well-known Asian American writer and critic, reintroduced it to the public in its reprint in 1986 with permission from the author. Ling acclaims *Crossings* as “the first modernist novel” in Asian American literature and describes it in her introduction to *Crossing* as follows:

Experimental in structure and form, the fragmented narrative is a collage of dreams, nightmares, autobiography, and fantasy. Its prose is often elegantly spare, its punctuation and syntax often unconventional. Quotation marks may be omitted; fragments and run-on sentences abound, and characters are often referred to only by pronoun. Spatial and temporal settings are unspecified, and chronological leaps may occur even within a single paragraph. (Forward 2)

Ling observes that “*Crossings* is the fullest expression of the upper-class female émigré experience,” that is, about the “shifting world of its protagonist, a dislocated Chinese American woman Fourth Jane” (Forward 2). Ling’s introduction for the reprinted novel

initiated *Crossings* scholarship that focuses on diasporic consciousness, identity transformation and stylistics. While modernist techniques serve as an apt tool for the writer to convey the dislocation and diasporic sensibility of her Asian migrants (and that of her own), her characters' upper-class background ensures their self-sufficiency and confidence, at the same time slows down their assimilation and attributes to, at least in part, their conservative attitude toward homemaking. Unexplored in the criticism, however, is the characters' homemaking acts and strategies that demonstrate the process of their identity transformation.

Crossings is about the diasporic experience and feelings of the protagonist and third-person narrator, Fourth Jane. When the story begins, Jane is temporarily staying in Paris and has an affair with a married Parisian journalist. She has broken up with her diasporic Chinese family because she refused to listen to her father and accept her white sister-in-law into their Chinese home. Jane constantly reflects on her past experiences and is lost in memories of and dreams about her family. Her affair, day dreams and memories juxtapose and intersect with one another on various levels (of the sentence, paragraph and chapter) to frame the whole narrative, bringing about a fragmented narration that is difficult to follow. As the story approaches its end, Jane has finally decided to leave her lover for home, and simultaneously she has come to a clearer understanding of herself and her relations with her home and family. As Wenying Xu puts it in "Chuang Hua" (2001), this book is a study of various kinds of crossings – geographical, racial, cultural, linguistic, and metaphorical – that Fourth Jane has made in quest of the self (62-64).

Among her numerous crossings and quests, Jane's understanding of the home stands at the center. She holds dear the Chinese home pattern that her family has

managed to reconstruct in diaspora because such a pattern has given her the only stable identity that she can hold onto as a migrant. There is a lot that Jane enjoys in a home of traditional Chinese style: the unity and closeness of family members, sharing Chinese delicacies among themselves and performing rituals together, to name a few. It seems that she does not care whether such a home fits with the cultural milieu in America and whether she behaves differently outside the home. In this sense, the Chinese home is performed by Jane as a cultural symbol and an emotional retreat. Jane's desire to cling to the Chinese home pattern accounts for her conflict with other family members when the latter are willing to forego such a traditional version of home in admitting a white woman into their family. Actually Jane has remained the most adamant person in her family to insist on the Chinese model, resisting new members that threaten to change such a pattern in spite of her father's sickness and death partly caused (or accelerated) by her stubbornness. It is only when she is finally away from home in Paris and with her French lover that Jane begins to think over her own understanding of the home and finally realizes that her clinging to the "authentic" Chineseness makes no sense in a changed milieu. In the end, she determines to accept the changed pattern of her family and be ready to be a Chinese American rather than a sojourner Chinese.

Jane's evolving ideas about the home bespeak the tension and process of her identity transformation as a result of the diaspora. Insistence on an "authentic" Chinese home model in a changed milieu has caused increasing conflicts among Jane's family members because some of them come to see the necessity to forgo such a home pattern. A changed idea about the home, accordingly, will lead to an enhanced understanding of the diasporic home and cultural identity for Jane and her family, and for many other

migrants as well. Jane's Chinese American home, therefore, is a microcosm of numerous immigrant homes in the process of assimilation and identity transformation.

Diaspora and Cultural Identity

Since modern diaspora is marked by crossings of multiple geographical and cultural borders, it often deprives migrants of a stable sense of home and at the same time necessitates their negotiation of cultural identities. *Crossings* is a salient example of such vexing experiences. Fourth Jane, the protagonist, has crossed the ocean "seven times and [made] four cultural adjustments" (Ling, *Between Worlds* 109). To be more precise, Jane was born and spent much of her childhood in China, moved with her family first to England, then to the United States and graduated from college. She then worked in her father's banking business for some time, but quit her job and went to Paris to seek her own separateness. By the end of the novel, Jane is ready to return to her Chinese family in America.

So many border crossings have a significant impact on Jane. To begin with, they have been a challenge to her. Jane has to learn and adjust to many new things, including the acquisition of English and French besides the Chinese language, exposure to different cultures in having a Scots governess, an Irish nurse and a French lover. These are the gains of diasporic experiences, or "an enriching cultural diversity" according to Amy Ling ("A Rumbling" 31). On the other hand, diaspora inevitably means an inexorable deprivation of many individuals' sense of security, which entails a stable sense of home and cultural identity. This is especially the case with many adult migrants and those who have spent their childhood in their original country, a significant period for the formation

of the sense of home, place and cultural identity. For Fourth Jane, Chineseness has already etched itself in her mind and memory. Hence diaspora is indeed a bitter pill for her to swallow.³

In discussing the relationship between cultural identities and diaspora, cultural theorist Stuart Hall introduces in “Cultural Identity and Diaspora” (1990) two different ways of thinking or, in his terms, two positions. The first position, according to Hall, is the conventional understanding of cultural identity which defines the concept as “one, shared culture, a sort of collective ‘one true self,’ ... which people with a shared history and ancestry hold in common” (223). Hall explains that within the terms of this definition, cultural identities “provide us, as ‘one people,’ with stable, unchanging and continuous frames of reference and meaning, beneath the shifting divisions and vicissitudes of our actual history” (223). This is the identity that people normally acquire if they live within the same cultural milieu for a long period, and it is also the identity that numerous migrants seek to retain or return to while living outside their original cultures. But the clash between cultures jeopardizes the original cultural identity that migrants have carried with them. In their endeavor to settle down, immigrants also have to negotiate with the new culture. Hence Hall argues that, as the second approach to understanding cultural identity, we should view it as “a matter of ‘becoming’ as well as of ‘being.’ It belongs to the future as well as to the past” (225). As Hall puts it, in diaspora cultural identities “undergo constant transformation. Far from being eternally fixed in some essentialised past, they are subject to the continuous ‘play’ of history, culture and power” (225). Although Hall is using this approach to discuss Caribbean diaspora and is doing so with a political claim for black people, his theory applies to

individuals of different diasporas, no matter whether these people have experienced prejudice and injustice in the receiving countries.⁴

As Hall contends, identities are “the names we give to the different ways we are positioned by, and position ourselves within, the narratives of the past” (225). Thus for migrants nostalgia is an unavoidable issue. They have to take sides, either “engulfed” by nostalgia and unable to move forward or overcoming it and participating in the mainstream culture of the receiving countries. Of course, reconciliation with one’s past and with an already established cultural identity is never an easy task. In *Crossings*, memories and dreams of the past are manifestations of nostalgia that Fourth Jane has to deal with before she is able to pull out. The fragmented narration of this novel, that is, the shuttle between the past and the present in narration, shows how significant the past is in shaping immigrants’ identity and impacting their present; it also shows what a daunting task it may be to rid immigrants of “the narratives of the past” (Hall 225).

But the past (as the primary determinant of cultural identities) and the seemingly simple feeling of nostalgia should not be simplified. As Hall cautions us, the past “no longer addresses us as a simple, factual ‘past’” because it is “always constructed through memory, fantasy, narrative and myth” (226). The past that immigrants try to recover is no longer “authentic” because it has been “filtered” or transformed by them. Seen in this way, cultural identities, according to Hall, are “the unstable points of identification or suture, which are made, within the discourses of history and culture” (226). Hence, the politics of identity is actually “a politics of positioning” (226). Borrowing Butler’s terminology, identity politics is also identity performance because such “positioning”

requires migrants' active participation in a variety of creative manners in their effort to represent or re-present a certain cultural identity.

In this vein, in positioning themselves between the pull of the past and that of the present, many migrants initially perform an "authentic" form of cultural identity but in time transform such a pattern, either unwittingly or painstakingly, to incorporate new elements from outside their accustomed model in order to flourish in the new land. Admittedly, included in their transformation process are also migrants' performances of their "authentic" identity as strategic essentialism for the purpose of social action,⁵ for ethnic solidarity or equality with other groups of people, for example. Fourth Jane's story in *Crossings* is merely one of the numerous narratives about such identity positioning. Jane's locale of self-positioning, or of her identity performance, is her own home where she struggles to make sense of two different cultural models in order to first keep the identity that she has held dear (namely as a Chinese) and then to acknowledge the identity that has become of her in diaspora (that is, as a Chinese American).

Ethnic Pride and The Unmarked Chineseness in the Novel

To better understand how Jane and her family reconstruct their diasporic home, in particular whether their initial preference over a Chinese home pattern is a natural continuation of existence in China or a performed activity, we should first turn to the historical context and this diasporic Chinese family's attitude towards their ethnic or racial identity in America. In *Crossings*, Chuang Hua portrays this Chinese family as one that is proud of its ethnic identity and tries to remain racially homogenous. Given the co-existence of many ethnic groups in the United States and the Civil Rights Movement in

the 1960s when *Crossings* was written, we are surprised to find that Chuang Hua has not made any comments on interethnic relations or on any racial issues in America.

In her dissertation chapter on *Crossings*, Karen Lee argues against “a tendency to oversimplify *Crossings* as a narrative of anti-assimilation, one relating the story of an immigrant returning to her Chinese roots, a reading partly based on Chuang Hua’s apparent incorporation of classical Chinese devices in her narrative” such as sparse prose, unconventional punctuation and syntax, and “circular disjointed narrative structure” (*Prosthetic Texts* 88 and 90). Although Lee’s argument is based primarily on the stylistic and linguistic features of the novel, I side with her and argue that the ethnic pride depicted in the novel is not a manifestation of the immigrants’ or the author’s anti-assimilation. I suggest that we attribute the ethnic pride of Jane’s family to four factors: the writer’s Chinese point of view, the Chinese family’s diasporic experiences and its economic condition, and the social historical situation in the United States after the family’s immigration.

First, Chuang Hua is writing primarily as a diasporic Chinese. She sees herself as a Chinese sojourner who will return to the motherland one day, therefore she has tried to keep as much “Chineseness” in her life as possible: Chinese name and food, Chinese customs and family relations.⁶ Her logic, point of view, and rhetoric are likewise colored by Chineseness. As a result, Chineseness is taken as default or unmarked in the novel as in some other diasporic/immigrant writings. As Lee notes, *Crossings* positions “the Asian race [namely the Chinese] as assumed, or default, center for the main characters. Asian racial traits are not described, whereas Caucasian racial appearances are attributed in detail, whether metonymically through the term “barbarian” national identity, or direct

physical description” (*Prosthetic Texts* 117). In Jane’s recollection of her childhood, for example, the maids and cook working in her family are all labeled with signifiers such as nationality and hair color: “Lisa the Austrian would be coming any minute still powdered and made up and scented at the end of her day off to put out the light. Blond Scots amah had put the boys to bed. Katie the Irish cook with mouse-colored hair had banked the fire in the iron stove and turned out the lights in the kitchen” (58-59). In another instance, when Jane describes the boys and girls having their meals separately with their maids, we can identify her similar usage of signifiers for non-Chinese characters:

The boys took their meals separately behind the closed door of the dining room with blond Scots amah an hour earlier than the girls who ate with their Austrian. The girls would tiptoe up to the closed door to peep through the keyhole, while the Austrian’s back was turned. All they could see was blond Scots amah in white uniform raising a fork to her mouth under the lights of the chandelier. (94)

Similarly, James’s white wife, whom Jane simply calls “barbarian” rather than using a specific western name, is also depicted with particular attention to the physical features that are different in Jane’s Chinese eyes: “Small hands with spare, birdlike fingers twisted and tugged at the voluminous folds of her skirt that barely concealed the body’s angularities. Now and then she raised a hand to finger a loose curl escaped from the haze of fine wavy hair which glowed an orange aureole against the lamplight” (53).

In contrast, all Chinese characters in the narrative are unmarked. We even cannot see any physical descriptions about them; instead, we find them addressed only by titles (for the elders) or first names. This distinct delineation between Chinese characters and characters of other ethnicities has to do with the ancient Chinese practice of addressing

outsiders differently, sometimes known as Han chauvinism.⁷ Han chauvinism refers to the ethnocentric point of view until the nineteenth-century in China, which often assumed cultural superiority of the Han Chinese majority ethnic group in China and despised the other minority ethnic groups. As Richard Fung explains, due to its close-door policy to the outside world, Chinese people at that time “imagined themselves at the center of the world” and “saw their country occupying the space between heaven and earth: the Middle Kingdom” (161).⁸ Since the ancient main Chinese dynasty carried out an imperialist, colonizing policy and looked down upon other minority peoples, the Han Chinese at that time categorized all non-Han ethnic groups, Manchus, Tibetans, Mongolians, Miaos, and Whites, for instance, pejoratively as “barbarians” (Fung 161). Although now the ethnocentric perspective and practice of Han chauvinism no longer exist (or are at least banned) in China, the word “barbarian” that conveys such a pejorative attitude has been kept and may be used in a general sense for something one despises or dislikes. Since Jane was in her childhood when her family left China in the late 1930s during Japan’s invasion, she might have picked up the term “barbarian” used at that time against the inhumane actions of the invading Japanese army, and along with it a Han chauvinist implication. Yet when she is outside the war-torn China and still uses such an ancient Chinese point of view to depict people of other ethnic groups, we may have to look for other factors to better understand such a perspective of Jane and her family.

I suggest that this Chinese family’s diasporic experience is another significant factor that contributes to their urgent need for a secure refuge, which they make out of their diasporic home. Jane and her family have crossed numerous geographic and cultural borders after they fled China, first living in England and then settling down in the United

States. As with other migrants, frequent moves and the pressure to adapt to different languages and cultures threaten to throw Jane's family into disorder. A close-knit family, therefore, is an anchor and a blessing against the hardships in diaspora. Jane's family, naturally, has followed its accustomed Chinese way of life led by the father and kept its ethnic pride. Hence Jane admits to her father: "By now it [her family's "first principle"] has become a necessity, I hardly know how to be without it" (196).

The affluence of Jane's family counts as another element to contribute to their self-confidence and pride in being Chinese. The father's career as a distinguished and wealthy doctor in China enabled his family to live an upper-class life before their diaspora and to accumulate vast savings over the years. Their savings subsequently ensured them a comfortable life in the diaspora. The family could still afford extensive travels, hire family maids, cooks and tutors when living as émigrés in England. Subsequently the father's successful investment in the stock market in the U.S. further ensured the family's financial security and an upper-class life. From these depictions in the novel, we can see that Jane's family belongs to what Peter Kwong calls the "Uptown Chinese," who were "professional elite Chinese immigrants living in affluent city neighborhoods or in the suburbs" and constituted what the American mass media called a "model minority" (233).⁹ In other words, Jane's family stayed away from the downtown "ethnic ghettos" and did not have to struggle for a living (Kwong 232-233), being exploited and prejudiced against in sweatshops, laundries, restaurants, or on farms. Instead, they lived on Dyadya's lucrative business and enjoyed their life in America as they pleased. To put it differently, being Chinese did not lower their quality of life in the United States. To add to their convenience, the New York Chinatown (although they did not live there) could

offer much Chinese merchandise they needed. As we learn from the novel, the family used to go to Chinatown for dinner by taxi whenever they felt like it. It is no wonder that they could stay in the old Chinese way and were confident and proud of being Chinese.

On the other hand, numerous works of fiction and non-fiction by immigrant writers have proven otherwise. That is to say, many lower-middle class or poverty-stricken immigrant characters had to work hard and assimilate as soon as they could in order to survive.¹⁰ Therefore, many immigrants had been eager to sever their ties with the original culture and be part of the American dream. Or at least it might take less time for them to finish their assimilation (if they were able to) than Jane's family did. In this case, these immigrants may not have been as proud of being members of ethnic minorities as Jane's family had in their adopted countries. Thus Jane and her family's ethnic pride could not be divorced from their upper-class sensibility; or to say the least, the family's easy life played some part in their pride as Chinese.

Last but not least, the socio-historical situation in the United States after the immigration of Jane's family may determine how her family felt as Chinese immigrants at that time. Since Chuang Hua has omitted dates in her characters' lives (in order to keep personal information secret in this autobiographical novel), we can only make guesses at the approximate times of their immigration. We only know that Fourth Jane and her family had lived in England for several years after their departure from China in 1937 and before immigrating to the United States. In addition, we learn that six of the seven children were born in China, while the youngest, Seventh Jill was born elsewhere. Since there were some significant changes in American immigration policy in relation to Asian,

specifically Chinese, immigrants between the 1940s and the 1960s, it seems likely that Jane's family entered the United States after 1943.

Until 1943, the United States implemented the Exclusion Act against Chinese immigrants that was passed in 1882. Initiated by the anti-Chinese labor agitators, this act "suspended the entry of Chinese laborers, both skilled and unskilled, ...but exempted merchants, scholars, teachers, and officials from such restrictions. It also specified that state and federal courts were not allowed to naturalize the Chinese" (Kwong 101). Considering that Jane's father had been a physician, he did not qualify as any of the exempted categories for entry during this period. In addition, Chinese immigrants were deprived of the rights of property ownership and of American citizenship. The average Chinese lived a very hard life in the United States before 1943. But in *Crossings*, Jane's family owned houses in New York City. Therefore, it is very unlikely that Jane's family entered the country during this period.

With the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor in 1941, the American attitude towards China underwent a dramatic change and the Exclusion Act was eventually repealed in 1943. According to the new quotas, 105 Chinese were allowed to immigrate each year. As Kwong puts it, "In terms of numbers, the repeal bill brought only a small gain, but it *did* allow the Chinese to become naturalized citizens of the United States" (202, Kwong's emphasis). What is more significant, since "most licensing and professional certification required U.S. citizenship, the Chinese in America were for the first time given the opportunity to participate in professional and commercial activities that had previously been denied to them" (Kwong 203). Possibly, Jane's father could have been among the

annual 105 Chinese and entered the United States as a professional after 1943 and settled down in New York City.¹¹

If that was the case, this Chinese family witnessed changes in US policies toward China in the 1940s and early 1950s. Upon entry into the country, they might find Americans regarding China as their ally against Japan in World War II. Chinese men and women, together with people of other minority groups, were allowed to work in defense industries and offices, the first time in U.S. history for Chinese immigrants (Peter Kwong 207). At the same time, a large number of Chinese men were drafted, many of whom, having come into the country with nonresident status or illegally, were granted citizenship for their military service (Kwong 209-210).

However, the subsequent Cold War, especially the vexing relationship between the United States and China, frustrated the hope of many Chinese immigrants for a peaceful and simple life in America and slowed down the process of their cultural integration.¹² Prior to and after the People's Republic of China was founded in 1949 and turned socialist, a great many Chinese immigrants, "long seen as aliens and foreigners by mainstream America, became prime suspects for disloyalty" (Kwong 216). The direct combat between the U.S. army and the Chinese army in the Korean War (1950-1953) exacerbated the relationship between the two countries. As a result, Chinese Americans were "caught in a serious conflict between the country that didn't want them and the country of their ancestors, which many had never seen" (Kwong 216). As Jane recalls while she is in France, "Our engagement in Korea paralyzed me. I saw with dread my two lives ebbing. Each additional day of estrangement increased the difficulty of eventual reconciliation, knowing the inflexibility of Chinese pride. In that paralysis I lived in no

man's land, having also lost America since the loss of one entailed the loss of the other" (Hua 122). During the prolonged nationwide witch hunt for communists and their sympathizers from the late 1940s to the late 1950s, a lot of active Chinese students, scholars, experts and journalists were on FBI's investigation list for their liberal or progressive views. Many cases of prosecution greatly altered the internal dynamics of Chinese American communities. This widespread witch-hunt atmosphere led a great many Chinese immigrants to "avoid involvement with leftist and progressive organizations, and gave the conservatives...the opportunity to regain their influence" (Kwong 222).

Jane's family had settled down in the United States by the 1950s and witnessed the ups and downs of American-Chinese relationship. Having fled from an invading war in their home country and experienced numerous dislocations, naturally they have a strong desire to live a peaceful life and keep away from all troubles. As Kwong contends, in the 1950s "Deportation proceedings against suspected communists, the imprisonment of leftists, and the Confession Program taught Chinese Americans a lesson: Keep quiet" (226). Coincidentally, we find that Chuang Hua has not recounted any of these important issues in *Crossings*. She was possibly in her teens at that time and would not have forgotten these events a decade later when she composed her autobiographical novel. Therefore, her silence about these issues is telling. We can imagine that a strategy that Jane's family most likely adopted is to keep to themselves, turn their home into a well-knit unity and keep out all "outsiders," economically, ethnically and in point of view.

Jane describes a wall that "encircled the courtyard" of their New York home (29), a wall that literally separates and fortifies her family against outsiders. If it did not make

good neighbors, at least Jane and her family hoped that the wall could give them some peace and comfort amidst all the troubles going on outside. Li Shu-yan and Monica Chiu have discussed another wall, namely the figurative wall “erected by Dyadya, encircling the family” against ethnic penetration (Li 107; Chiu 115). Along these lines, I argue that the ethnic pride is a manifestation of this Chinese family’s overall self-defense, among other things, in times of trouble. Similarly, the unmarked Chineseness in the novel is a narrative perspective, a convenient tool that a Chinese American writer employs to avoid direct confrontation with the problem of putting herself in the position of ethnic minority in the not-yet-too-friendly America in the 1950s and early 1960s. In other words, both the writer and her immigrant characters in *Crossings* are performing “Chineseness” unwittingly for survival.

Therefore, the Chinese home that Jane’s family reconstructed and tried to keep in America illustrates migrants’ endeavor to maintain their original cultural identity. Rather than seeing such a strategy as anti-assimilationist (as some reviewers of *Crossings* indicated),¹³ I suggest that it is these (im)migrants’ approach for self-protection and survival, especially at the beginning stage of their assimilation or when circumstances are against them. As Hall puts it, “It is because this New World is constituted for us as place, a narrative of displacement, that it gives rise so profoundly to a certain imaginary plenitude, recreating the endless desire to return to ‘lost origins’, ...to go back to the beginning” (“Cultural Identity and Diaspora” 236). In this novel, Chinese migrants can fulfill such a desire to some extent, by performing a home similar to the one in their original culture even though they are unable to go back to their homeland. In turn, their performance of the original home, if conducted successfully, will naturally postpone their

identity transformation and assimilation, as it is the case with Jane and her Chinese family.

However, no matter how comfortable and harmonious Jane's family members are living in their performed and fortified Chinese home and seemingly oblivious of the surroundings, in time they will come to the realization that identity transformation and assimilation are inevitable. In fact, their realization is forced upon them by a family crisis, namely Fifth James's marriage to a white woman. The family members' different reactions to this interracial marriage not only put their established home model to a test, but eventually lead to the disintegration of this performed home.

The Chinese Home as Model in Diaspora

Chuang Hua implies in *Crossings* that her Chinese characters construct their diasporic home as a natural extension of the original home in China. But I would suggest that such diasporic homemaking unconsciously emerges as a kind of performance. Joining together Hall's cultural theory and Butler's theory of performativity, I am arguing that immigrants' homemaking is a process of performing and negotiating cultural identity, even when it appears to reconstruct some authentic or original version of the home.

In constructing a particular model of home, immigrants are actually putting their cultural identity on display, the first of which is inevitably the identity they have carried with them from the original culture. With their gradual assimilation into the mainstream culture of the receiving country, however, these people's performed home model is most likely to undergo transformation, either being mixed with a different model from the

mainstream culture or being cast away into oblivion. Along these lines, the Chinese home that Jane and her family have made in the United States will inevitably undergo a similar re-construction. Although the home that Jane's family has made appears a well-organized union at the beginning of migration, it slowly undergoes transformation here and there in varying degrees. Even though *Crossings* ends without telling readers explicitly how this Chinese home has eventually been transformed, still we can see some significant changes to its structure at numerous places in the narrative. Thus Jane, and Chuang Hua accordingly, is giving a testimony of the transformation of Chinese immigrants' cultural identities by means of their homemaking, or performance of the home.

At the beginning, Jane and her family are unanimous in reviving their Chineseness at home in a way that the past has "positioned" them (Hall, "Cultural Identity and Diaspora" 225). Indeed, such homemaking appears natural, but it turns out to be the result of every family member's committed performances. Chuang Hua has used two significant metaphors in *Crossings*: an algae dish and the transplanted lichee tree. The algae dish that Jane's family once had in a Chinese restaurant aims to show the dislocation of this Chinese family; the transplanted lichee tree from China symbolizes migrants' vitality and prosperity in the adopted land.¹⁴ However, these two metaphors can also reveal that this diasporic family is performing their original cultural identity. As Jane recalls about the algae dish:

When the food arrived Dyadya said The lakes from which this particular algae grow and used to grow in prehistoric times were part of the sea before they became landlocked. There is a fish which can be found only in these lakes, a fish related to the whale, smaller than the whale of the ocean but of the same

species, which swim today in the China Sea. The stunted whales in the lakes feed upon this algae. During the Occupation the Japanese took samples of it to Japan and stocked their lakes with it. Today they export it to America in glass jars and we now have the pleasure of eating it in America. (19)

Mingled in Dyadya's remarks are not only traces of homesickness, but also some feeling of dislocation, conveyed by the metaphor of the algae dish that they can have in a round-about way in America rather than in their homeland. However, this passage also indicates that Jane's father considers the algae dish as authentic Chinese and by having such a Chinese dish, his family has kept their cultural heritage and Chinese identity. To put it differently, Jane's family is not savoring this dish as tourists; rather, they are expressing who they are by consuming it. Similar to the algae metaphor, the lichee tree in this novel also has cultural connotations. Just like the lichee tree that Chinese immigrants have brought to America and "planted in American soil, in the South where the climate and soil are similar to certain southern regions where lichee flourish" (17), Dyadya believes that his family can also take root and flourish in America. Confident as he is about his family's future in the United States, I suggest that what Dyadya initially has in mind is not to flourish as an American "subspecies," namely to integrate into mainstream American culture (which we can see from the way he leads his family), but rather as a Chinese living outside the homeland. Similar to the lichee tree, Dyadya hopes that his family will flourish in America as a unique species. Thus both the algae dish and the lichee tree metaphors show that Jane and her family are determined to keep and display their Chinese identity in America. They are performing their cultural identity, as is seen in the Chinese tradition they have followed in making their diasporic home. The

performances of the diasporic home present themselves in how the children are named, how the family members address one another, and how they represent Chinese customs and values.

Since homemaking involves all family members and their interpersonal relations, naming and addressing system in Jane's family are two aspects of performing Chinese identity. In Jane's account, her siblings and cousins all have two given names, that is, each of them has a Chinese name preceded by an American name. Although these people's names are all fabricated, the way they are named still shows how this migrant Chinese family perceives its cultural identity. As Jane introduces, her siblings are named according to their seniority: First Nancy Chen-Hua, Second Katherine Kwang-Hua, Third Christine Tswai-Hua, Fourth Jane Chuang-Hua, Fifth James Chuang-Shin, Sixth Michael Chuang-Chu, and Seventh Jill Lo-Hua. The second part in their names, namely their Chinese given names, strictly follows the Chinese rules in order to unify the naming system of the family genealogy. To be more specific, the first character indicates generation (males and females of the same generation usually have different characters), the second character is the personal name or given name. Thus Jane's brothers both have a "Chuang" as their generational name whereas Jane and her sisters all get a "Hua" for their generational marker. This naming practice reflects a traditional Chinese custom in which members of the same generation in an extended family share an identical word in the names. But like other diasporic Chinese, Jane's family also gives the children American names, which are put directly in front of their Chinese names. The seniority among siblings is also reflected in their names by simply putting an ordinal number at the very beginning, such as First Nancy Chen-Hua and Fifth James Chuang-Shin. As we

learn in *Crossings*, Jane and her siblings are referred to in everyday life only by their American names, while their Chinese names are never used. Therefore, these Chinese names do not have any practical function; rather, they are simply for showing their cultural heritage. Put in another way, the Chinese portion in the children's names is performative.

The way Jane's family members address one another also reveals the performative nature of their Chineseness. In this family, the elderly are not addressed directly by their names. Jane has never mentioned the names of her grandparents, parents, aunts and uncles, not even bothering to make up names for them. Instead, we only see Jane address them by their titles from her own perspective, such as Uncle Two, Aunt Three, Dyadya (father), Ngmah (mother), Grandmother and Grandfather. This is a typical Chinese way for the younger generation to address their elders in order to show respect. According to this custom, nobody should address the members of older generations (and the elder members of the same generation) directly by their given names, otherwise it will be an offence to the latter. However, we cannot come to the conclusion that this Chinese family is naturally following their accustomed Chinese way of life, because such addressing only applies to the elder generations in the family. For Jane and her siblings, only American names are used. If they followed the Chinese customs strictly, they would also address the elder siblings by titles. Given names should not be used in this case, either. Furthermore, they would at least call one another by their Chinese given names rather than the American ones. Therefore, I suggest that in using the Chinese addressing system selectively, Jane's family is performing their Chineseness. To the elders who prefer old customs, other members usually display some Chinese manners in order to please them.

Another performative act that catches our attention about Chinese addressing is the words Jane uses for her parents. Instead of the general usage of “father” and “mother,” she has chosen two dialectal terms “dyadya” and “ngmah,” which she must have been using since her early childhood in China. The choice of these two Chinese terms is a sign of closeness and endearment, an affection that Chinese children usually show to their parents. To our surprise, Jane does not address her grandparents in this dialect. Thus she is playing with the Chinese words only to please her parents.

Traditional Chinese values also get “performed” in *Crossings*, which is evident from how Confucianism is embodied in this extended family, especially in relation to family structure and expected roles of its members.¹⁵ In a traditional Chinese home, the father is usually the center of the whole family. It is the ideal family pattern based on Confucian principles. That means the father is the primary breadwinner and has the final say for main family issues. Therefore, the father requires and deserves respect and obedience of all other family members including his wife. If he provides for his elderly parents, he will make decisions for them although he may sometimes seek advice from his father, but hardly any from his mother. Hence an old saying goes to the effect that a traditional Chinese woman’s life is organized around the male, namely father, husband and son respectively, in different periods of her life. I would suggest that patriarchy is part of the Chinese heritage that all of Jane’s family members have internalized and performed unwittingly in the adopted land. It follows that the unity of Jane’s family that most *Crossings* scholars have discussed as emotional backup for this diasporic family turns out to be a manifestation of such Confucian principles.¹⁶ It explains why this family has always been at one on almost everything, why the father is depicted in the way Chuang

Hua does in this novel, and why the mother always supports the father in whatever decisions he makes. Jane calls this patriarchal structure the “first principle” in her family (196). As she says to her father, “I played my part in your system of balances, forever ready to forfeit what was to my own advantage so as not to shake that first principle, the essential mode of my existence. It was a hard lesson to come by and you required it of me. By now it has become a necessity...” (196).

All members in Jane’s family are aware of the specific roles expected of them and try their best to perform well until they are accustomed to such performances and regard them as natural. The most important performer in this family is Jane’s father. According to Confucianism, the father as the head of a household should be commanding and benevolent, demanding respect and obedience and at the same time caring for every family member. In Jane’s account, not only is her father acting as such an “ideal” patriarch, but also he is conscious of the principles behind his acting. There are detailed and lengthy depictions of the father sitting in one of his two armchairs in the living room or in his bedroom. Where his armchairs are positioned reveals his role in the family:

Dyadya sat in the violet armchair next to the German radio phonograph of bleached blond ash in the music corner at the end of the living room. Seated there one could see almost the entire entrance hall through the wide connecting door always left open to better keep track of comings and goings at the front door except during piano lessons and Chinese lessons and French lessons before the girls started going away to college...

The view from the armchair also included the long corridor giving on to all the bedrooms. It began at one end of the entrance hall and ended at the last

room which belonged to Dyadya. On another side of the living room a pair of double doors, two folding panels on each side, kept open a part of the dining room in view and the door to the pantry.

Dyadya's other armchair in his room at the end of the corridor was placed in line with the length of the corridor. It ... embraced a view of the corridor, the entrance hall, all the way to the music corner of the living room and the violet armchair.

Unless he was in bed or in the kitchen or not at home, he was to be found usually seated in either armchair reading, meditating or dozing... (70-71)

Sitting in this way, the father oversees everybody else and everything going on in the house. Nobody except the head of the household can enjoy such a privileged view.

Literally, he is in control of all family issues, from the family financing to purchases and meals, from children's education to their marriage arrangements, from family rituals to entertainment. In order to establish his own authority, the father demands his family's absolute obedience, no matter what he wants them to do and no matter how changeable he may be. As he says in his accustomed way, "I am father I can do no wrong" (196). A telling example about his performing his role is his reaction to James's marriage with a white woman. At the beginning, the father is enraged at James's marriage with an (ethnic) "outsider" without asking for his permission. He demands everyone else in his family to exclude James from their activities. However, when he learns about the young couple's poor life, he determines to help and subsequently tells his family to accept James and his white wife. His explanation for his change of mind is simply "I am father I know what is right" (197). Obviously his remarks are not convincing because he is

abusing his power rather than persuading by reason. In Butler's terms, he is performing his authority.

Dyadya also plays the part of a considerate and loving father who deserves respect and devotion. Jane recalls numerous everyday trifles that reveal Dyadya's care and love for the whole family. He patiently made phone calls to all the children reminding them to send flowers for their mother's birthday. He drove three hours to Jane's college dormitory and then hurried back home only to send her a new typewriter. He watched his family affectionately and took care of their various daily needs. The following passage is only one of the many caring details about such a father:

He looked around and examined each of his own, found a dangling hairpin about to fall off Second Katherine's hair, which he undid from the hair and handed to Katherine, noticed Third Christine's outmoded coat, threadbare around the edges and made a mental note to take her shopping, a speck of dirt clinging to Fourth Jane's cheek which he brushed off with his hand, and patted Ngmah's arm in satisfaction for not having found anything askew on her. (81)

The father's peculiar manner to attend to his family's financial needs merits additional mentioning. As Jane recalls, Dyadya has opened separate accounts for all his family members in his stock investment and managed these accounts alone for them. He constantly checks buying power in these accounts, making sure that "all [accounts] must be equal no one part of more value than the other" (172). In managing the accounts for all his family members, he cared for their financial needs as much as he cared for his own. He is generous whenever anyone in the family is in need for money, even after the

children have grown up and earned their own living. In a creative manner, Jane represents her father's monologue addressing each of his children by his or her account number:

Account 595221 ... Though she had barely begun to talk I brought her for the brief stay, knowing that they would be glad to see her after more than a year's absence and that she would be no trouble on the journey, being a solemn and wise child and obedient...

Account 595222 When she finally came home after spending three years in the tropics I waited at the gate and watched the plane come down...

Account 595223 She wants nothing. She produces life...

Account 595224 Between her wanting and not wanting she left me in constant confusion at each of our encounters...

Account 595225 I waited for him a long time...

Account 595226 We raced on the cement wall by the edge of the river... He took me by surprise...

Account 595227 We went out to the country to water the potted plants... I stopped the car at the foot of the driveway and we told her to stay in the car until our return... The last born is loved like all the rest but a little more. (175-180)

Admittedly, many loving fathers would have behaved like Dyadya in their care for the family, but I would suggest that Dyadya's actions are based primarily on Confucianism. In Confucianism, "Ren" is the ultimate principle that regulates various social and familial relations ("Ren" can be broadly translated as "benevolence").¹⁷ As far as the father is concerned, he is formulated by the principle of "Ren" as a loving and

benevolent authority in the family. In *Crossings*, Dyadya is consciously regulating himself (in addition to his family) by such traditional philosophy. The Confucian classics that he frequently consults are telling about the philosophical foundation of his behaviors. As we learn from Jane, “On the bottom shelf just above the adding machine were tattered copies of Mengtse, Kungtse and works of minor Chinese philosophers and several copies of the *Tao Te Ching* translated into English by a literary friend. The *Tao* he read in English, together with the Chinese text, covering both texts with marginal annotations in English and Chinese ...” (73). Dyadya is obviously aware of the role expected of him as a father (by the traditional Chinese philosophy) and is consciously striving to perform such a role well. Therefore, his “self-raging love and self-sweet bondage” under the influence of Confucianism is a unifying force for the whole family (57), and undoubtedly becomes the most striking feature of this traditional Chinese home.

Ngmah has also tried her best to play her part in this traditional home. Traditionally, a Chinese wife should unconditionally support and obey her husband. Ngmah must have been a follower of this old custom, for there has been a tightly-built oneness between her and her husband for many years since their marriage. Although Chuang Hua does not state explicitly in *Crossings* whether Ngmah has followed the tradition voluntarily in her absolute support of her husband, there is no mistake about the strong impact of tradition on this diasporic Chinese family. Jane has mentioned this feature of their home repeatedly. As she says to her father, “our unity based on the oneness of you and Ngmah ... must not be shaken, under which we all submitted” (196).

However, later in the narrative Ngmah’s preference of one Chinese custom to another exacerbates their family crisis and ironically proves that she is both a defender and

an abolisher of the cultural heritage. She objects to Dyadya's decision to help James and his white wife and welcome them back home. Ngmah gives first priority to her family's ethnic purity when it comes to keeping their Chinese identity. Therefore, she refuses to accept a "barbarian" (that is James's wife) into her Chinese home, even though in doing so she ends up undoing the unity between her and her husband that they have maintained carefully for so many years. I suggest that Ngmah must have suppressed some of her own ideas after marriage due to the Confucian patriarchal principle. Yet in China submission to her husband was always a Chinese woman's duty and at the same time meant retaining of tradition. She did not see any conflict between the two. As a migrant, however, Ngmah is at a loss as to what to retain and what to discard when Chinese tradition clashes with a new culture in the adopted land, especially when her husband decides to disregard tradition in order to welcome an "outsider." As a result, Ngmah paradoxically chooses to cling to the Chineseness of her home rather than obeying her husband and breaking the ethnic purity. Therefore, the choice she makes turns out to be a performative use of the Chinese heritage, a choice that in turn accelerates the collapse of her traditional home.

Obviously Jane and her siblings are subject to such patriarchal tradition resurrected in their migrant home. They have to play the respectful and submissive role as Chinese children everyday in everything they do. Filial piety,¹⁸ a basic principle in Confucianism, denotes such respect and obedience that a child, originally a son, should show to his or her parents. Such a cultural value is reiterated in children's education, even is present in their bedtime stories. In view of the significance of filial piety in China, insolence to seniors or failure to observe such a cultural value will incur harsh punishment. Jane recalls the maid amah's bedtime stories about punishment for matricide and patricide in

ancient China: "The most dreadful of all is punishment for matricide or patricide. The criminal is hacked into one hundred pieces. Starting out with the extremities the executioner chops off toes and fingers, ears and nose. Gradually he works his way toward the trunk of the body"(64). Growing up with inculcation of such Confucian values, Jane and her siblings have gradually internalized the idea of filial piety and performed it unwittingly in their everyday lives.

The grand celebration of seniors' birthdays is another example of filial piety on display in the narrative. Since veneration of the elderly people is one of the traditional Chinese virtues, senior members in a Chinese home always enjoy the respect of the whole family. Their birthday celebration, accordingly, is a significant family event and often is attended by the whole extended family. In contrast, young people's birthdays usually receive little attention, if they are celebrated at all. Chuang Hua presents an affectionate picture of such elderly veneration. One chapter is devoted to describing how the big family celebrated the grandmother's eighty-fourth birthday in America (25-31). About two-dozen people from three households gathered together to pay respect to the family matriarch and watch the family video about their life in the United States. In another chapter Jane recalled her family's celebration of Ngmah's birthday (14-19), including the family's plan several days before the event, children sending flowers to their mother and the family's celebration dinner at a Chinese restaurant.

Considering the priority of senior members reflected in family activities in their honor, we are not surprised to find that there are not any descriptions or mere mentioning of birthday celebration for any children in Jane's family. Since Chuang Hua has not provided any comments or explanations in the narrative, I would suggest that she has

been so accustomed to these practices in the Chinese home that she does not cast any doubt about the “fairness” of the different treatments of the old and the young. The depictions in *Crossings* also imply that many Chinese migrants have carried traditional customs and values such as filial piety to their adopted country and performed them “truthfully” so that they regard these performances as natural, or as a means to “return” to the homeland. However, what Chuang Hua and some migrants are not aware of, or do not acknowledge, is that such performances of cultural heritage are not fixed: they will change and may even disappear with these immigrants’ assimilation.

The leading role of the eldest child is another area of cultural performance in *Crossings*. In a traditional Chinese family that follows Confucianism, the eldest child is burdened with the most responsibility and is expected to serve as a role model to his or her siblings. In addition, the eldest child may act as a surrogate parent during the latter’s temporary absence. Thus he or she is usually the one among the siblings who both benefits and suffers the most under such tradition. For one, the eldest child has authority over the siblings and is usually the most important heir to the family fortune; for another, he or she may get the severest punishment if he or she should fail to perform the duty, lead the siblings in a wrong way or provide a bad role model. Therefore, to perform the leading role well the eldest child usually has to hide his or her ideas that are different from those of the parents. I would suggest that the eldest child’s role is the most performative one among his or her siblings in a traditional Chinese family. The novel illustrates such leading roles that First Nancy and Fifth James are expected to play (Nancy is the eldest among her siblings, while James is the eldest son). In an instance when the whole family was walking down the steps into the Underground, Dyadya called

out to Nancy and James, reminding them of the role they should play among the siblings. As he says, "Nancy you are my firstborn and you are to lead... James you are my firstborn son and you are to lead" (57-58). Aware that such a leading role is demanding for a young child, Dyadya acknowledges this hard task in his monologue about Nancy: "Later after the others arrived I told her you are my eldest, my first, you must lead and she accepted this and did the best she could and carried on for years, my deputy among her sisters, brothers and strangers. I took it for granted and perhaps this was too much of a strain" (175). Although there are not detailed depictions in the narrative about how Nancy has played her leading part, from Dyadya's comments on her as "a solemn and wise child and obedient" we can see that she must have tried hard to perform her role (175). I would further suggest that Nancy is consciously performing her expected leading role, sometimes even at her own disadvantage or risk. Once she even injured herself for the sake of her siblings (to keep her family's privacy Chuang Hua omits details of the accident and anything related to it). Dyadya tells Nancy after the accident: "Everything is all right. You have done your duty, there is no need to do more" (176).

As the eldest son, Fifth James is also expected to perform the leading role as Nancy does. However, growing up under the influence of western culture, James must have been unwilling to follow the Chinese tradition and be an obedient son. His refusal to perform the expected part at home, which remains hidden until finally he is away from home and marries a white woman, is a crisis and turning point to this Chinese family in how they should understand their cultural identity. Dyadya expresses his shock at James's daring decision to break from tradition:

When he came recognition was automatic. I did not question him he was my

firstborn son. Neither did he seem to question his position so I never asked him if he knew his role. Since he never spoke I was convinced we were in accord. I was therefore taken by surprise and at first blamed him for not being willing to play out my expectations. And I began a crash program of lectures to correct our misunderstanding. I was much disappointed and excluded him for many years...

(178)

From what James chooses to do we can see that this Chinese family has been performing the cultural identity they have brought with them from the homeland. The majority of them, especially the older generations, take such performance as natural extension of the Chinese culture and never question its feasibility in their adopted country. It is James's decision to break from tradition that shocks the family into recognition of the infeasible feature of their Chineseness in America and thus accelerates the process of their cultural transformation. But until James's marriage, the family still performs its Chinese identity unconsciously in everyday life.

Another form of cultural performance in Jane's family is Chinese cuisine. In other words, food and the consumption of food are performed by this diasporic family to convey cultural identity. As Monica Chiu observes, *Chuang Hua* allows numerous details "to resound with meaning in Fourth Jane's memories as well as to transport the reader across emotional terrains, fusing events that may have occurred at different times and in varying locations" (121). One of *Chuang Hua*'s favorite details is Chinese cuisine. In addition to the emotional function that Chiu suggests, the depictions about Chinese cuisine convey cultural messages that have not been given enough attention in some scholars' discussions. If we agree to the saying that we are what we eat, then it follows

that Jane's elaborate and frequent introduction about various Chinese foods and how to cook them can only pinpoint her family's Chinese identity. Jane itemizes the dishes the whole family once had at a Chinese restaurant in honor of Ngmah's birthday: "in groups of threes and fours they went by taxi to the Chinese quarter to eat crab and snails and carp tails and shrimps and spinach and bean curd and bitter melon, Ngmah's favorite" (16). As Hasia Diner observes in *Hungering for America: Italian, Irish and Jewish Foodways in the Age of Migration*, food for immigrants "embodied where they had come from and what they had achieved" (83). Therefore, many immigrant writers have acknowledged the significance of food in their struggle for "self-identity and creativity" (Goeller 236).

Indeed, having their favorite Chinese dishes together is one way for Jane's family to remember their heritage and define their cultural identity. But I would further this argument by suggesting that cultural identity is not simply registered by what food one eats, it is also performed by how one consumes the food. In describing how Jane and her family have some Chinese dishes, Chuang Hua shows the "performed" traditional Chinese home pattern and cultural identity. A salient example is Jane's vivid description of the whole process of her family having a crab feast at home, from the preparation of the dish and the particular sauce to go with it to the ginger tea after the meal and the family maid's warning against eating persimmon right after having had crabs. The paragraph about the family at table is worth mentioning:

Dyadya takes a crab, Ngmah takes a crab, amahs steps forward to pick out crabs to put in plates of children. They bend their heads to concentrate on the hot crabs. Break them apart while still piping hot. Eat them fast enough so that the ones remaining in the cauldron should not get cold. Best hot. No noise

except cracking and tearing shells apart, chewing, sucking. You're big enough to mix your own blend of soya sauce, vinegar, ginger, sugar to your liking. Plop. Watchful amahs empty the mess from the plates. Of a hundred different ways to eat crabs this is the best, stirs the heart and is the most basic. Do not invite guests. There are no outsiders attending the feast. They are eating at home among themselves. (208)

The first thing we should pay attention to is the order of taking crabs. As the head of the household, Dyadya has the privilege to take the first crab. Ngmah follows him according to her order of importance at home. Then it is the children's turn to get their crabs. Amah takes care to put crabs in the children's plates only after Dyadya and Ngmah have taken theirs. This order should be followed correctly because it embodies the patriarchal pattern of traditional Chinese families. The second thing to pay attention to about this crab-eating scene is the closed up nature of this meal. In other words, it is a family occasion. The family members enjoy a delicacy among themselves without inviting any guests. Metaphorically, it may imply a traditional mindset that Chinese people had for centuries, namely the desire to keep to themselves and exclude "outsiders." Therefore, the manner of having dishes is also a form of staging on the home pattern and performing cultural identity.

The family crab feast is unforgettable to Jane. This scene appears in Jane's recollection while she is living alone in Paris. Admittedly, we can interpret Jane's memory of this family feast as a manifestation of her homesickness, but at the same time her nostalgia is also a longing for Chinese identity. Even though she has been living in the West for about two decades and has experienced different cultures and tasted foods

cooked in different manners accorded to distinct cultures, she still believes the Chinese way of eating (not only crabs) is the best because it “stirs the heart” (208). Therefore, the family feast that Jane recounts is a self-reminder and a confirmation of Jane’s Chinese identity.

Therefore, Butler’s theory of performativity is an apt tool for analyzing diasporic homemaking. Just as naturalized conceptions of gender can be understood as constituted through bodily performances of various kinds (“Performative Acts” 270), the seemingly natural phenomenon of the diasporic home is an identity performed through habitual acts of individual members and through repetition of rituals and customs of a particular culture. In *Crossings* Chuang Hua unconsciously plays with the idea of a traditional Chinese family and renders it an unwitting performance of the “authentic” cultural identity on the part of both writer and characters. In their effort to reconstruct an “authentic” Chinese home, Chuang Hua and her characters actually are performing the home pattern they have carried with them from the original culture. Such performances are evident in how the children are named, how family members address one another, and in how some Chinese values and customs, especially Confucianism, get represented in the family structure and everyday lives. Their cultural performances, however, can hardly be “authentic,” nor will they remain unchanged over time because of the influence of western culture in the receiving country. I suggest that such cultural infiltration eventually leads to their transformed home pattern. To put it differently, their performances of the diasporic home unwittingly move away from the “authentic” Chinese “script” and toward a hybrid pattern that is closer to the mainstream western

“script.” The writing, too, is a “hybrid” performance: it is an experimental modernist novel combining modern Chinese and western literary techniques.¹⁹

Impact of Western Culture on the Chinese Family

While Jane and her family try to hold onto their old home pattern and Chinese identity in their lives in western countries for more than two decades, it is impossible for them to avoid the impact of western culture. Over the years western culture has found its way into this fortified Chinese home and gradually change the habits, attitudes and beliefs of Jane and her family.

Jane and her siblings have all adopted western names and are addressed only by these names instead of by their Chinese ones. In terms of the languages used by Jane’s family, we should note that over the years, the children (namely Jane’s generation) are using increasingly less Chinese in spite of their private Chinese lessons at home. Even though we can never make the ungrounded assumption that in time few people in this family will be able to speak their ancestral language at all, as it is a general concern of many ethnic groups in the West, at least we have seen some traces of such a tendency in *Crossings*. On the grandmother’s eighty-fourth birthday, the little children shouted “Happy Birthday” at the grandmother “in English or Chinese whichever they were capable of” (26). Even the old lady herself, at this happy moment occasionally whispered “machine gun,” “the only word she could by now remember in English” (26). Although “machine gun” is a phrase incongruous with the family celebration and thus sounds funny, the old lady’s utterance of these English sounds is a telling detail about the inevitability of change in this diasporic family.

The impact of western culture on Jane's family is also manifest in their beliefs. Jane has mentioned her family's faith in Christianity. For example, Jane and her brothers and sisters, while still in their childhood, attended Sunday school, prayed and sang hymns together before going to bed. Dyadya prayed to God to bless his family in America at the celebration dinner for Ngmah's birthday. Due to Chang Hua's omission of details, we do not know for sure whether her Chinese characters' faith had started in China or after they had left their home country. But we do know for sure that Dyadya and his family allow this western belief to take some place in their diasporic life along side the traditional Chinese philosophy. Like many other Chinese Christian immigrants, however, Dyadya's Christian belief was colored by the traditional Chinese philosophy, namely Confucianism. In other words, many Chinese immigrants, specifically the first-generation immigrants, ran their Christian church in a patriarchal way, and in their incorporation of Confucianism with Christianity, they try to keep their cultural heritage intact.²⁰ Along these lines, Jane's family could paradoxically practice Christianity but still maintain their Chinese belief. Such syncretism is immigrants' first step of cultural integration in that they have to adapt to the mainstream culture in order to survive but are still reluctant to part with their cultural roots.

We have seen explicit western influence on the adult Jane, in her changed idea about sexual freedom in particular. Traditional Chinese values emphasize women's chastity and disapprove of sex before marriage. In *Crossings*, however, the narrator has obviously accepted the western idea of sexual freedom and disregarded her conservative Chinese upbringing. After she quit her job in her father's banking business, Jane moved out and lived alone for a while in a rented apartment. We learn from the novel that she

had a lover, who visited her in her apartment, helped plant an apple tree on her terrace and canoed with her near an island. Some clues in *Crossings* indicate that Jane was pregnant with his child and later was treated in the hospital for an abortion (or a spontaneous miscarriage). As she recalls:

Amah led her back to the room, turned on a green shaded bedside lamp and exclaimed when she pulled away the top sheet, uncovered the pool of blood. She hastily stripped the bed and removed the blot.

Have I lost him? Is it all over?

She got back into bed. Shivering between clean icy sheets she heard him wade out of water. (161)

.....

He [Six Michael] took her home which he would have done anyway. But because it was late and dark and cold, the streets slippery with ice and huge embankments of frozen snow not yet removed at unfrequented crossings along their way, and because she had just left the hospital that week he took special care to help her across the snowy streets... (106)

After breaking up with her boyfriend, Jane flees to Paris in an attempt to enjoy temporary separation from home and from her unsatisfying love. But in Paris she has an affair with a French journalist, who is happily married and yet often visits Jane in her apartment. Jane's sexual transgression, as Karen Lee points out, is "shameful in light of her traditional Chinese upbringing" (*The Searchers* 84). With her abortion and possibly also suffering from a "serious emotional and physical symptoms of post-abortion trauma," Jane has a psychological conflict (Lee, *The Searchers* 84). She may be justified in having

turned “barbarian” by following the American concepts of individuality and sexual freedom, but she is also likely to feel guilty at having disregarded Chinese tradition and becoming a “bad girl” in her parents’ eyes. In regards to her upbringing and subconsciousness as a Chinese, Jane has every reason to keep this part of her life well concealed. Indeed, Jane admits having been Americanized at least as far as her sexual life is concerned, but she is definitely not proud of it in front of her parents.

Like Jane, James also believes in freedom of love. He falls in love with an American classmate of his and marries her without first consulting his parents. Unlike his sister, however, James eventually informs his parents of his decision, only that he does so when he is far away from home – when he is in Germany serving for the American army. He has ignored the letter from his parents telling him to first return home and then marry for fear of their disapproval. As with many young immigrants, sexuality and marriage play a significant part in the assimilation of Jane and James.

Even the family patriarch, Dyadya, has to learn to cope with the changed cultural milieu as a migrant in the West. As Yichin Shen argues, the collection of books in his study and the order of arranging them are “very revealing” about the “heterogeneous makeup of his identity” and the actions he has to take “to keep up with the change” in diaspora (276):

Above the ledge shelves of books wall-to-wall rose up to the ceiling.

Hardback books mostly on men of action he read from cover to cover in some he had posted reviews neatly clipped from newspapers, and how-to-books on finance, accounting and gardening. On the very top shelf beyond normal reach, he had placed his collection of thick, somber volumes on medicine. On the

bottom shelf just above the adding machine were tattered copies of Mengtse, Kungtse and works of minor Chinese philosophers and several copies of the *Tao Te Ching* translated into English by a literary friend. The *Tao* he read in English, together with the Chinese text, covering both texts with marginal annotations in English and Chinese during the first year after James's marriage.

(72- 73)

Since he can no longer practice medicine in America, Dyadya has put the books on medicine on the top shelf "beyond normal reach." In order to survive and make it in the adopted countries, he turns instead to some practical subjects such as finance and accounting. The books on gardening are useful guide for him to enrich family life and enjoy nature, while the Confucian and Taoist copies are read most frequently as his "philosophical foundation" so that they are all "tattered" and covered with "marginal annotations" (Shen 277). From his collection of books we learn that Dyadya has to make some significant changes in life to fit in with the changed circumstances in diaspora.

In view of the manifold influence of western culture on (or Americanization of) Jane's family, it is evident that their performed Chinese home cannot last long. In other words, assimilation into the mainstream culture is inevitable. Love and unity among the family members only serve to suppress the undercurrent of change and postpone the actual confrontation of different cultures. Eventually this problem surfaces as a family crisis at the moment of James's marriage. The family members' dispute over this interracial marriage not merely puts their Chinese home to a test, but actually leads to the disintegration of this well-maintained home model.

James's Marriage and the Disintegration of the Chinese Home

James's marriage eventually brings the family problem to the surface and causes the breakup of his Chinese family. On the surface, the family's disintegration is the result of racial conflict, due to the family dispute over James's marriage. On further exploration, however, we find that the breakup of this Chinese home has to do with how the family members interpret and maintain their cultural identity.

James's letter to announce his imminent marriage catches his family by surprise. He has not consulted his parents about the choice of his marriage partner, a white woman, for he may have been well aware that his parents would not agree to it. He simply writes his parents, while still stationed in Germany serving in the American army, that he will "first marry then travel before coming home" (50). Dyadya's letters to tell James to put off the marriage till he comes home are to no avail. The newly-wed James and his wife "traveled for nine months in Europe and the Middle East" with the money that his father had sent him for joining his family for a trip to the Far East (51).

Considering Dyadya's authority at home and the Chinese upbringing he has given to the children, we can imagine the anger and disappointment he has to James's marriage. As the first-born son in the family, traditionally James is expected to play a leading role among his siblings, especially in relation to his filial duty. His strong will and ignoring of his parents in relation to his marriage, therefore, not only is a challenge to his father's authority, but also proves the infeasibility of the Chinese home model in diaspora. Therefore, Dyadya's opposition to James's marriage is not a surprise to everyone. Later Dyadya explains his exclusion of James from his family in this way:

I waited for him a long time. When finally he came I found him so unlike me.

His lack of emotion relieved me from the burden of mine and reassured me that he would be counted on to do the right thing. ... I was therefore taken by surprise and at first blamed him for not being willing to play out my expectations. And I began a crash program of lectures to correct our misunderstanding. I was much disappointed and excluded him for many years. (177-178)

Indeed, nobody in Jane's family has displayed any disapproval of James's wife as an individual. Personally, James's wife is friendly and eager to be part of the Chinese family. As she says, "I am so eager to know all about you. I hope you will tell me all about yourself and teach me how to cook your way. James loves your food and so shall I when I learn how to tell the real from the fake. I know it will please James. I'm so eager to know everything because I want to be one of you" (54).

But Jane and her family are not ready to take this white woman into their home because they have not seen her on the personal level. Actually, Jane has not even given a name to James's wife. This white woman, in the eyes of Jane and her family, is only a cultural signifier, a threatening agent to their well-protected Chinese home. Li Shu-yan argues that it is "her racial identity and the alien ideas she stands for and voices that shock them" and believes that James's wife "disturbs the calm and brings forth the unspeakable desire of the family – to keep it monoracial" (106). I agree with Li that Jane and her family see James's wife as an "intruder." Jane refers to James's wife as "the barbarian," the only "name" she has used repeatedly in the narrative for her sister-in-law. As Jane says, "The barbarian stood outside the barred gates of the wall. After fruitless years of patient search, with gnawing heart, she founding a weakness along the immense

wall encircling the garden, found, followed, married Fifth James and entered the garden at dusk" (50).

Since "barbarian" is an ancient Chinese term to address outsiders (out of the contemporary political point of view of Han chauvinism), it does not refer exclusively to white people, nor is it merely a racial term. Jane uses this word with cultural implications: to represent people or things that are foreign to and intrusive upon Chinese culture. Therefore, Jane's family members all see this white woman's marriage with Fifth James as a cultural break-in. To maintain their Chineseness, they are forced to keep the "barbarian" intruder outside their home, together with James. In Dyadya's words, James has also turned "barbarian" by marrying outside the Chinese community.

Jane's well-knit family has thus split up with its exclusion of James and his wife. It seems that this Chinese home still keeps its cultural core, only that it is now smaller. But to make things worse, the pregnancy of James's wife and the baby's birth changed Dyadya's mind. Dyadya's belated acceptance of his daughter-in-law and his first grandson causes a dispute in his family and finally led to its disintegration and his own death.

According to Dyadya, he cannot bear to see his own son struggling to make ends meet and not to help because the father is made to remain at the center of the traditional Chinese family. In his words, "Now that he has come to me for help I cannot refuse him my first born son and I love him because he is mine" (178). More importantly, he cannot exclude his grandson from his family genealogy. In other words, his grandson must bear his family name and extend his family line. Along similar lines, Karen Lee argues that "Dyadya accepts the white woman as a part of the family for the sake of the new

generation" (*Prosthetic Texts* 119). Yichin Shen also expresses the similar view that the grandchild "cannot be denied of its patrilineal birthright" (279).

I would like to extend this argument and suggest that Dyadya accepts his daughter-in-law and his grandson out of traditional Chinese philosophy, namely, the Confucian idea of filial duty. According to Confucian preaching, among the three failures of one's filial duty, having no progeny is the worst. As a faithful follower of Chinese tradition and customs, Dyadya must have seen the birth of his grandson as the fulfillment of James and his wife's, and thereby his, filial duty. Thus to Ngmah's rage, Dyadya tries to persuade her and other children to accept the couple: "I want you to accept now that she is to have our grandchild" (174). Later in chiding Jane for her disobedience, Dyadya refers to James's wife as "the better daughter" for the latter has given birth to his grandson and thus becomes dutiful in his sense. I suggest that Dyadya's acceptance of James and his wife for the sake of filial duty is another form of Chinese values getting "performed." In his performative use of traditional values, however, Dyadya paradoxically provides an opening for his family's assimilation and at the same time leads to the disintegration of his traditional home.

Yet to Dyadya's surprise, Ngmah and Jane remain adamant against accepting James' wife, despite the fact that he has taken the lead in the attitude change. As a traditional Chinese woman in diaspora, Ngmah must have some difficulty deciding what to do when Dyadya changes his mind. To obey him means the destruction of their mono-racial Chinese home; to disobey him is also at odds with her cultural upbringing. No matter what she decides to do, she will still be in the wrong. As it turns out, Ngmah

chooses to disobey Dyadya in order to “guard” the Chineseness of her home, another form of cultural performance.

Jane has supported her parents’ traditional view when she rejects her sister-in-law. Her family upbringing has centered upon the idea of following Chinese tradition, being a “good girl” and always obeying parents. However, she has also received western education in England and the United States. The distinction between cultures bewilders her at times so that she has developed a fragmented personality, namely a diasporic sensibility. Luckily, the unity of her family has been a relief for her because she does not have to take the trouble to make judgments herself. Instead, she can simply follow her parents, especially her father. It is no wonder that she is on her father’s side for his decision to exclude James’s wife and James from the very beginning.

But later on Dyadya’s change of attitude towards James’s wife and Ngmah’s persistent rejection put Jane in a dilemma. With her parents’ disagreement, the oneness of her parents and the unity of her family, which she used to rely on for decision, are gone forever. Unable to choose between her parents’ sides and failing to tell whether her father’s or her mother’s position is more “authentic” Chinese, Jane is at a loss. She confesses this to her father: “The oneness of you and Ngmah you have built so tightly you can’t undo overnight just to accommodate them. You taught me that first hard lesson, I survived the trial and accepted my place. It’s unfair to try me a second time” (196-197).

Consequently, Jane chooses to escape: to leave all the troubles of her family behind in an attempt to calm down and find a solution on her own. She quits her job at her father’s business and moves out of home. Actually, Jane’s leaving is in defiance of her

father. Her departure further splits up the family and contributes decisively to its disintegration and her father's imminent death. All this is irrevocable.

On the surface, the family's disintegration is the result of racial conflict, due to the family dispute over James's marriage. On further exploration, however, we find that the breakup of this Chinese home has to do with how the family members interpret and maintain their cultural identity. The older generations of this family tend to attach more importance to Chinese heritage. Having managed to "resurrect" a Chinese home in America, they become performers of the traditional activities, customs and values. In contrast, its younger members are more susceptible to American culture and thus gradually move away from their cultural heritage. They may still participate in performing some Chinese activities and rituals at home, but their performances are becoming more routine-like, mostly out of an intention to please the elders. Chances are young members' performances have American characteristics, as is seen in their naming and their endorsement of sexual freedom. Furthermore, Dyadya's decision to accept a white daughter-in-law and Jane's insistence on the purity of the Chinese home further complicate the cultural identity of this diasporic home. Therefore, the family problem is essentially a cultural conflict, which manifests itself on both familial and personal levels. As we learn, its personal dimension is especially represented by Jane's struggle over her independence and identity.

As we read at the beginning of the novel, Jane finally finds herself away from home in Paris ruminating about the past, about her family and its unity and disintegration (there is no explanation in the narrative why Jane chose Paris as her temporary retreat). It is already too late for Jane to reconcile with her late father, and she has an urgent need to

find herself. But can she bring about a reconciliation with herself and with other people in her family? And how?

Reconciliation and Identity Transformation

For Jane and her family, James's interracial marriage has triggered the family crisis about cultural identity that everyone involved has to face and respond to, although the responses may vary. Cultural identity has been a focus in *Crossings* scholarship, but these discussions have considered it merely as a problem that the narrator, or the writer, has experienced. The other family members have been ignored in the criticism. I would like to suggest that this problem concerns everybody in the family, although Jane is the narrator and thus the center of attention. I will discuss how individual members of this Chinese family deal with cultural clashes and achieve their identity transformation. It is their different (re)actions that have changed the family structure and led to its disintegration. It also needs their joint effort to bring about a reconciliation with one another for their cultural transformation as well as for the future of their home.

James is the "culprit" of the family crisis, in addition to the victim of his family's exclusion. He is the first in his family to achieve cultural integration, literally, by marrying into the mainstream society. There is little depiction of him in the novel, except for a passage in which Dyadya addresses his children in the stock language. In Dyadya's introduction, James is silent and exhibits a "lack of emotion" (177-178). It appears that James is inclined to do things rather than questioning, discussing and brooding. He is the only one in his family to join the army and the also the only one among his seven siblings to marry outside the Chinese community (as far as the timeline in the novel is concerned).

Therefore, I call him a man of action. He performs what is required of him by his father and his superiors in the army. He also does what he wants without much consideration about the consequences, as it is with his interracial marriage.

Although he has never contradicted his father, it does not mean that James has always agreed with him. The few signposts in the novel show that James hardly expresses his own ideas at home, therefore nobody can tell for sure what he thinks about his cultural identity and how he likes his Chinese home. Borrowing Butler's terms, I suggest that James disapproves of the patriarchal manners of his father and considers them as performances of out-dated tradition. It is most likely that he cannot and dare not challenge his father's authority, therefore he "performs" whatever appears appropriate in front of his Chinese family and takes care not to show his internalized American values in order to avoid direct conflict. As a result, he seems to be a "good boy" at home but may hold back some dissent and also his individuality.

James seems to be the most Americanized person in his family. His experience of serving in the American army may have enhanced his sense of being an American rather than a diasporic Chinese, which is an awareness that many of his family members have acquired. Having done his part for the country may also have boosted his self-confidence and contributed to his desire for independence. As a young man with western education, James would be susceptible to outside influence, drawn by the western idea of individuality, among other things, because of its distinction from the patriarchy of traditional Chinese culture which dominates his home. He has been attracted by a white woman and married her, admiring some of the qualities that she has but may be lacking in some of his family members. From Jane's recollection we learn that James's wife is

open-minded, eager to learn what her husband likes and to be part of his Chinese family. Her openness may have been a sharp contrast to James's mother and sisters who, in their determination to maintain their Chineseness (at least at home), have refused to accept some western ideas such as individuality.

But at the same time James is reluctant to part with his some of his Chinese heritage, especially not with Chinese cuisine. That is why his wife is "so eager to know everything" about Chinese culture in order to please him (54). She especially wants to learn how to cook in Chinese way, as she tells Ngmah, because "James loves your food and so shall I when I learn how to tell the real from the fake" (54). Admittedly, we cannot tell for sure whether such "rhetoric of food" is merely a manifestation of this white woman's "culturally touristic expectations for Chinese heritage" in her intention to be Chinese (Lee, *Prosthetic Texts* 118). But her determination to do so in turn proves that James cannot completely sever the connection with his Chinese heritage. He has to find ways to negotiate the cultural difference and define his own identity.

In his wavering between Chinese and American culture, he has given first priority to personal happiness at the risk of a break with his Chinese home and heritage culture, as is the case with numerous immigrant youth. Although his parents met the white woman once when they "came up to the university for a one-day visit," James had kept his family in darkness about his love so that they all wondered "who is she" upon receiving his marriage notice (50). As a man of action, James is ready to carry out his own plan. When he is stationed in Germany and away from home for more than two years, James has finally found some personal space and a chance to be his own boss. Upon leaving the army, he decides that the first thing to do is getting married. He seems to consider this

moment as the best opportunity because it would be difficult for him to get permission from his parents to marry a “barbarian” once he has returned to the States under his parents’ roof and control. Consequently, James wrote his parents resolutely that he would “first marry then travel before coming home” and ignored his father’s letter asking him to “put off the marriage till he came home” (50).

Having forced his marriage upon his parents, James still hopes that “eventually they would be reconciled and accept her and be happy too” (52). But reconciliation is by no means an easy step for his parents and some of his siblings. In his own decision to marry a “barbarian,” James has defied his parents and the Chinese order of life. If we agree that James has overcome the cultural barriers and been Americanized, his family has to disregard or abandon the well-maintained Chinese tradition at home before they can reconcile with him. It is a painful task for many first-generation immigrants. Indeed, not everybody in his family opposes his interracial marriage, but with his parents’ rejection, other people in the family can only follow their lead. Finally, however, James’s parents did change their mind and accepted him and his white wife, but this reconciliation not only is a belated gesture, but also comes at a great cost: the death of the father and the disintegration of the well-knit Chinese home.

As I have suggested earlier in this chapter, Dyadya finally decides to accept his white daughter-in-law and welcome his son back home not because of his own assimilation into the multi-ethnic American culture, but primarily due to his love for his son (he cannot bear to see his son living a humble life) and out of consideration for his own family genealogy (a Confucian idea). No matter what motivates him to do so, however, his change itself is a significant step toward cultural transformation. He is now

more open to outside forces and may welcome more changes, should they come his way. He seems to have realized that assimilation is inevitable and that he himself is unable to stop others from changing, even if he remains resistant. He may also have realized that not all changes are against him (he will enjoy the happiness of being a grandfather). Hence he tries to persuade his wife: "Life is change, we live in change. Please I want you to accept now that she is to have our grandchild" (174). To Jane, Dyadya simply says: "I want all my children to be generous" (195).

Unfortunately, Dyadya's argument is not convincing enough to Ngmah and Jane. He asks them to change because he has decided to change, regardless of the fact that he has opposed his daughter-in-law and been ungenerous to her himself. When he fails to persuade Jane, however, Dyadya resorts to his accustomed authority: "I am father I can do no wrong" (196).

As a patriarch claiming "I can do no wrong," Dyadya has undergone great internal struggle before he finally determines to recognize his daughter-in-law. But he has to learn how to cope with changes, although he desires to make a stable Chinese home in diaspora. In other words, Dyadya also has to experience identity transformation as a migrant. Yet the trouble is his family may not understand him at times or are unable to keep up with his changes. Now he is facing such a difficult situation when he decides to accept his daughter-in-law. Both his wife and his daughter Jane are against him, but he still insists on his change of attitude. The well-knit home is thus gone forever. We can imagine the difficulty he has gone through in persuading himself for such a decision and the great pressure he has undergone when facing his family's opposition. In his rage and helplessness at Jane's refusal to recognize James's wife, he asks Jane: "if I were to die

would you be for her? If I were to die how would you feel having opposed me?" (197). Unfortunately, Dyadya did end up dead of hemorrhage not long after, unable to bear so much in life.

In his effort, Dyadya has acknowledged some emerging change to the structure of his Chinese home, but at the cost of his own life and an inability to live to see his family reconciled with one another. After his death, the family members, specifically Ngmah and Jane, are expected to achieve their reconciliation as well as identity transformation, but they may do so separately and at different rates.

Ngmah is quick to reconcile with her daughter-in-law after her husband's death. As her resistance has contributed to such a tragedy in her life, namely Dyadya's death, she must regret what she has done. Thus she does not want to see her family living in unhappiness and separation any longer. Ngmah's recognition of her daughter-in-law, however, is conveyed in the Chinese way: by action rather than in words, by accepting her quietly in everyday life rather than saying sorry to her directly. As she expresses herself in her monologue: "Tomorrow my firstborn son will come to fetch me for the drive to the country where I shall put flowers in front of his altar. She may come along if she wishes. I accept" (171). On the other hand, I would suggest that saying sorry directly to the daughter-in-law will prove difficult for Ngmah, a Chinese senior who is used to children's respect and obedience at home. In addition, it takes time for her to get used to the changed family structure and to accept a new member from a different culture. Anyway, her daughter-in-law has been the direct cause of her family conflict and her husband's death. She may still harbor some resentment against this "intruder."

In her effort to make up, Ngmah holds the first party for the whole family after her husband's death, a party that signals her reconciliation but without saying so. The way she puts it about her invitation to her son James and his family is revealing about Ngmah's complex psychology: "this was the way I put it to him. James I am having a party next Thursday night. You are invited to come. I particularly did not mention her name. I did not say I was inviting her though I did say bring the baby" (139-140). However ambiguous and weak her signal is, Ngmah has gestured towards a reconciliation with her daughter-in-law, and with it the acceptance of the changed home structure. I suggest that Ngmah is forced to face the reality and adapt to the changed family structure after Dyadya's death because she does not want to hurt more people in her family as she has done to her husband. Ngmah's passive acceptance of change is therefore different from Dyadya's active approach to change and assimilation (although for different considerations).

In Jane's depictions, the other people in her family seem to have no difficulty recognizing and reconciling with James's wife. I suggest that either they are the "good children" by Chinese standard and do whatever the parents tell them to do, or they have Americanized and do not draw the line at interracial marriages. Jane's elder sisters may fit in with the first case. In Dyadya's accounts of his children, First Nancy is always a good girl, a satisfactory lead sister for her siblings: "I told her you are my eldest, my first, you must lead and she accepted this and did the best she could and carried on for years, my deputy among her sisters, brothers and strangers" (175). Thus Nancy may have sided with her father and also changed her own stand with him. Similarly, Second Katherine and Third Christine are both obedient daughters in Dyadya's eyes, "completely out of the

running in this system of balances and counterbalances I have devised over the years to maintain harmony and equilibrium between the head and my extensions and the extensions among themselves" (176-177).

Conversely, Jane's younger siblings, namely Sixth Michael and Seventh Jill, may have integrated more into the mainstream culture than their elder sisters and do not oppose interracial marriages as strongly as the others do. In Dyadya's description, Michael behaves more like an American boy who cares more about enjoying life than doing "his duties" because he "spent too much time hunting and fishing, singing and strumming his guitar" (178). Seventh Jill is a practical person according to Jane. After the death of their father, it is Jill who tried to persuade Jane to accept James's wife and attend Ngmah's party. She urged Jane to face the reality: "It seems to me you cannot live forever not seeing her. There has to be a meeting. She exists" (142). For Jill, it will not be realistic if they continue avoiding James's wife: "But you cannot avoid her. You are bound to meet. It's not realistic" (142). Although Jill feels "embarrassed at having used the word realistic" to her sister Jane, she has expressed what she wants to say (142). It is evident to Jill and to other people in the family, except Jane, that a realistic attitude is what they need to deal with their family problem. They cannot hide away in their well-barricaded Chinese home anymore. In order to develop and succeed in the adopted country, they must be more open, accept cultural integration and undergo identity transformation. Their home structure is bound to change.

Jane is the only person in her family who refuses to reconcile, even after her father's death. Possibly having the greatest diasporic sensibility in the family, Jane identifies strongly with her Chinese heritage and considers her well-knit home as her

anchor in her numerous dislocations. Consequently, she cannot tolerate any outsiders to break in and destroy the well-maintained Chineseness of her home. Her rejection of her white sister-in-law is a natural result of such a sentiment. However, in her bewilderedness as to who to support when facing her parents' disagreement over the recognition of the "barbarian" intruder, she chooses to escape but unfortunately contradicts with her father's decision and contributes decisively to her father's sudden death. Guilt and regret must grip her heart. She cannot forgive herself as much as she cannot forgive her sister-in-law because, according to herself, they are the two main culprits who have been responsible for her family's breakup and her father's death. Jane's resentment toward her sister-in-law is strong: "She has played her role in completing our story. My life from now on is separate from the story which has ended. My life now has no place for her" (141). At the same time Jane cannot forgive herself, as she explains her refusal to attend her mother's party and face her sister-in-law: "You see I cannot bear the end of the story. I cannot bear my part" (142).

Jane chooses to avoid the reality and finally makes her way to Paris, a place remote enough for her to leave everything behind temporarily, to calm down and think about her situation. There, Jane eventually comes to understand her identity and is able to reconcile with herself, with her late father and with her changed home. She finally decides to leave Paris for home. All this awareness is partly brought about by and through her recollections. Jane recalls various times when she was with her family and tries to understand what her Chinese home really means to her. Jane's self understanding is also the result of her affair with a married Parisian journalist. As it turns out, memories of her past and of her family unfold simultaneously with the development of her affair. The

fragmented narrative structure in *Crossings* reflects the disorder of Jane's thoughts and her intense mental struggle. As Monica Chiu argues, "form functions as meaning in Chuang's *Crossings*" (107).

Jane is more conscious of her diasporic situation now that she has once again crossed the geographical and cultural borders. In the mirror she found her own face "appeared intolerably alien and unclaimed as the space and light around her" (40). She can even discern the motif of diaspora from the carpet design in her room, from its "faded reds greens and blues and whites in which she discerned oases and deserts, scorpions and camels, departures, wanderings and homecomings woven inextricably there" (187).

Reasonably, Jane misses the warmth and closeness of her family. The daily activities the family did together, the meals they had, the rituals they attended, Ngmah's and her grandmother's birthday celebrations all come to her mind. She recalls the tender love that her father extended to her and other family members, his hours' driving to her college dormitory only to send her a new typewriter, his reminders to all the children to send flowers for Ngmah's birthday, to name a few. Against such backdrop, the memories of Dyadya's sudden hospitalization, his death and funeral are all the more sorrowful to her. She even has a vision of Dyadya's resurrection. Now Jane must be able to appreciate Dyadya's love more and wishes she could reconcile with him.

Not only does Jane long for her family, she also misses the landscape of China, the homeland that has nourished her but is now inaccessible due to the wars and variable political situations. The following account that she gives her French lover about a magazine from China captures the moment of her nostalgia:

One evening she visited Dyadya and found in his study a magazine sent from

China. On the first page was a poorly reproduced photograph of a farmer's house built up of mud and rushes and roofed in tile standing in the middle of a neatly tilled field. A tree clung by the wall of the house, a line of mountains beyond the fields. With a shock she recognized the landscape, could smell the tilled soil, felt the embrace of the house, climbed the mountains. Unguarded, a seizure of loss struck her. For an instant she could not breathe. (124)

With the mixed feelings of longing and loss, Jane tries to fill her time and find solace in cooking, a means for her to perform Chinese identity. She has prepared some dishes to share with her French lover, from steak to chicken to roast duck, each more elaborate and more complex than the previous one. However, he does not appreciate her work and hardly eats anything she has spent much time preparing. Nor can he understand the complex feeling she has put into the action of cooking. Instead, he tells her: "You're always busy cooking whenever I come. It's not much fun" (123).

It seems that in her contemplation Jane is drawn increasingly to her Chinese heritage and has mainly perceived herself a Chinese in diaspora. Put in another way, she chooses only to perform the Chinese part of her identity and has temporarily forgotten that American culture has also played a part in her identity formation. But her French lover's attitude towards the Chinese awakens her. According to him, Jane should go back to and work for China because she is Chinese. Jane realizes his essentialist attitude: "I needn't be told that. But that is no reason for going back. Besides once I enter it's unlikely I'll be able to get out. You forget I am also American" (121).

Actually Jane is also reminding herself of her own American identity. When it comes to the prospect of returning to China, she admits: "Too late now. Farm house,

field, solitary tree, the distant mountains have fused, have become one with the American landscape. I can't separate any more. If I were to live in China today I would have to conceal one half of myself. In America I need not hide what I am" (125). Now Jane begins to see that America, like China, is also an essential part in her life. She is shocked into realization that she has been neglecting the American part of her identity all these years:

I couldn't live without America. It's a part of me by now. For years I used to think that I was dying in America because I could not have China. Quite unexpectedly one day it ended when I realized I had it in me and not being able to be there physically no longer mattered. Those wasted years when I denied America because I had lost China. In my mind I expelled myself from both.
(121)

Jane finds herself able to think more realistically now. When her French lover claims: "America is not your country... You have to go back. You have no future in America. You are an exile in America as you are in exile here," She argues: "I am in exile here voluntarily in order to rest, to remove myself from ties for the moment" (121).

If Jane merely took the "ties" as her ties with Chinese culture and with her Chinese home before her Paris trip, now she is obviously conscious of two ties she possesses: one with Chinese culture, the other with American culture. Therefore, no longer perceiving herself a Chinese (or an American) in the general sense, Jane has acquired a unique sensibility as a Chinese American. Thus she proclaims: "I belong to both, am both" (125). This split sensibility, or double consciousness, is common among Asian immigrants. As Li Shu-yan puts it, the established identity of many Asian Americans is

neither all submission to the old culture nor full acceptance of the new, but rather, “Through the working out of the conflicts, a new awareness emerges, giving evidence of the existence of an experience that can be called ‘Asian American’” (100). In Jane’s case, her reliance upon and conflict with her Chinese family, her participation in American life but rejection of her “barbarian” sister-in-law, the death of her father and her moving out of home are all manifestations of the identity conflict that are common to Chinese Americans, and by extension, to Asian Americans. Yet a clear consciousness of her Chinese American identity does not come home to Jane until she is away from both cultural milieus and has an exchange with an essentialist Frenchman (there is no account in *Crossings* of the influence of the French culture on Jane’s sensibility, primarily due to the fact that she is there only as a visitor).

Homecoming and the Changed Home Structure

Now that Jane has come to terms with her identity transformation, she is eager to return home. Her recollection of a movie about American Indians she has seen several times reflects her longing for home (although the name of the movie is never revealed in *Crossings*), only that her home now is not what it used to be. The movie is a captivity narrative, in which a small white girl kidnapped by the Indians and having lived among them for some years is finally rescued and brought back to her own people as “half child half woman” (105), that is, she has just reached her adulthood and already married a captain of the tribe.²¹ Jane finds herself drawn to the homecoming scene in the movie and recalls that she “sat through it three times, twice alone and the third time with Michael on

a day they had dinner together. The first two times she found herself weeping just before the lights came on” (105).

Jane identifies with the lost girl in the movie and hopes for a return home and to her original culture.²² Among Jane’s favorite scenes is a scene of the house in which the girl had lived, “framed in the dark doorway of the adobe house” (103). Another scene that Jane cannot forget is one in which the girl’s rescuer finally finds her, urges and gathers her up to cross the river to where she belonged. The rescuer’s words resonate with Jane: “Cross. You don’t belong there. You belong with us” (105). Jane also finds another scene moving, that is, the scene in which the girl was finally brought back home with her rescuer’s line: “I have brought her home” (105).

Despite Jane’s similarity to the lost girl in their homecoming or would-be homecoming, their situations are further complicated by personal and familial heterogeneity. As Karen Lee argues, “the theme of homecoming and familial ethnic heterogeneity becomes crucial and cannot be simplified as a young woman’s desire to get in touch with cultural roots” (*Prosthetic Texts* 80-81). Like the white girl in the movie, Jane has left home and lived among people of different cultures, or among “barbarians,” in her own words: while the white girl married an Indian captain, Jane has loved an American and had an affair with a Frenchman. Although their love stories differ, these two women are similar in their contact with a different culture (or different cultures), physically and socially, and thus are no longer considered “pure,” to borrow a term from the Indian captivity narrative (Lee, *Prosthetic Texts* 81). Along these lines, the rescued girl is unlikely to be returned to “the nuclear, racially homogeneous home at the outset of the film, but to a new kind of home that is ethnically mixed, one that can re-integrate a

captive woman by ethnicizing her race” (Lee, *Prosthetic Texts* 81-82). As Lee puts it, this movie indicates that in the larger context of Cold War society “the face of America can be easily altered to include Third World immigrants if ethnicity is simply rationalized as being another shade of white” (*Prosthetic Texts* 82). Unlike the home in the movie, I would further suggest that Jane’s Chinese home has undergone a structural change because of James’s marriage to a white woman – regardless of Jane’s love experiences. Jane’s love with men of different cultures may serve to enhance her appreciation of interracial love and marriages.

The fact that Jane cried during the Indian captivity film is significant in that it is not about place or object but about identification, about acts and rituals of homecoming. Therefore, if Jane decides to go home, she will be able to acknowledge its structural change. In Jane’s words, “the center shifts” (204). She describes her acknowledgement in the following metaphorical passage about the changed house: “There are two gates in the north wall, three in the south, two in the east and two in the west. Winds blow from all sides. In the center is stillness. Winds blow from all sides. The gates are open. The center shifts” (204). As Lee puts it, Jane has harbored China at heart but now she comes to terms with “the American ‘point’ shifting within herself as a form of migration of spirit” (153). In other words, Jane has reached a reconciliation with the past, with herself and with her changed Chinese home. She has finally acquired a better understanding of life and a consciousness of her heterogeneous Chinese American identity, just as she has begun to appreciate the structural change of her diasporic home: from being purely Chinese to a mixture of the Chinese and Americans.

Near the end of the narrative Jane once more repeats her familiar action of packing for the return trip home from Paris. Her French lover's predicting remarks "You won't come back" will prove true this time (130), for Jane is now ready to embrace both her heterogeneous home and her own hybrid Chinese American identity. We can expect that after reaching home she may gradually replace her diasporic consciousness with a more realistic and more balanced point of view.

The ending of *Crossings* is an image of Jane's grandfather practicing *tai chi*, or calisthenics, that embodies the idea of balance:

Grandfather practices calisthenics. In the yard of his former gate keeper's house he makes studied movements of limbs and body. He is frail and each gesture is very precise. His eyes squint in the sun. His sight is clear. He retreats, advances, and with each change of movement he inhales and exhales. The air comes out of his mouth in puffs of vapor which dissolve in the morning air. (215)

The essence of *tai chi* is the balance of energy flow.²³ Through gentle bending, twisting, contracting and extending movements combined with deep breathing, the grandfather seeks and achieves vitality and balance. This state of being and point of view positioned at the conclusion of the novel encapsulate Jane's, as well as the writer's, findings after the geographic, cultural and psychological crossings. Diasporic homemaking similarly needs to achieve a balance in a changed cultural milieu by performing different cultural patterns of appropriate proportion. The home as *tai chi* in its balanced state is an ideal for immigrant home performers as manifestation of their successful negotiation of cultures and identities.

In exploring how Jane and her Chinese family reconstruct their diasporic home, we can see that their homemaking is actually a form of cultural performance. They attempt to re-create an “authentic” Chinese home, but the home thus constructed turns out to be a “performed” Chinese one mingled with some western practices. The family members’ different interpretations of their cultural identity are responsible for such a home performance (although unwittingly) and eventually lead to the breakup of this well-knit Chinese home. Although Chuang Hua has not stated the performative nature of her characters’ homemaking in *Crossings*, her vivid depiction serves such a purpose. Therefore, no matter whether it is a conscious or unconscious practice, cultural performance and cultural transformation are both inevitable for immigrants, as is seen in the homemaking process of Jane and her family.

Endnotes

¹ Li Shu-yan, 99; Monica Chiu, 122; Karen Lee, *Prosthetic Texts*, 117.

² Karen An-Hwei Lee, "John Ford's *The Searchers*," 79.

³ In "Home, Hybridity, and the Caribbean Diaspora," Mari Peepre discusses similar situations, in which diasporic individuals growing up on the Caribbean islands are all "troubled by their lack of a coherent subject position" after their migration to the West (224).

⁴ Recently some Asian American theorists have similar articulations about cultural identity. Lisa Lowe has formulated Asian American identity as a hybrid construction, as "contested and unsettled, as taking place in the movement between sites and in the strategic occupation of heterogeneous and multiple positions" (Lowe 82). See Lisa Lowe's *Immigrant Acts: On Asian American Cultural Politics*. Durham: Duke University Press, 1996; Sheng-mei Ma's *The Deathly Embrace: Orientalism and Asian American Identity*. Minneapolis: University of Minneapolis Press, 2000; Stephen Hong Sohn and John Blair Gambler's "Currents of Study: Charting the Course of Asian American Literary Criticism" in *Studies in the Literary Imagination* (Spring 04).

⁵ Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, Indian literary critic and theorist, coined the term "strategic essentialism," which is about the need to accept temporarily an "essentialist" position in order to be able to act. This is a strategy many immigrants have adopted temporarily for the purpose of social action. See Spivak's "Can the Subaltern Speak?" in *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*. Eds. Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg. Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1988: 271-313.

⁶ In view of the varying definitions of “culture,” I would like to clarify that I have adopted the definition of “culture” by UNESCO (the United Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization) in 2002, which states that “... culture should be regarded as the set of distinctive spiritual, material, intellectual and emotional features of society or a social group, and that it encompasses, in addition to art and literature, lifestyles, ways of living together, value systems, traditions and beliefs”. Therefore, the cultural identity that Jane and her family have tried to keep is a Chineseness in its broad sense, including ethnicity, language, art, rituals, ways of living, norms of behavior and beliefs, among other things. The Chinese home model that Jane and other members of her family have tried to maintain, accordingly, is almost a miniature Chinese society in the western world.

⁷ Karen Lee, *Prosthetic Texts*, 87.

⁸ Richard Fund, “Seeing Yellow: Asian Identities in Film and Video.” *Aguilar-San Juan*. 161.

⁹ Peter Kwong and Dusanka Miscevic, *Chinese America: The Untold Story of America's Oldest New Community*. New York: The New Press, 2005.

¹⁰ See, for examples, representations of immigrant characters in Maxine Hong Kingston's *The Woman Warrior* (1976), Jade Snow Wong's *Fifth Chinese Daughter* (1950), Anzia Yeziarska's *Bread Givers* (1925) and Bharati Mukherjee's *Jasmine* (1989).

¹¹ As Karen Lee observes, another possibility is that Jane's family might have immigrated to the States after the 1952 McCarran-Water Immigration and Nationality Act, which was passed in response to the demand for educated professionals, without racial restrictions, who would facilitate American industrial expansion (*Prosthetic Texts* 94). 30,000 Chinese were admitted with immigrant status according to this act and

became the Uptown Chinese (Lee, *Prosthetic Texts* 94). Since Jane's father has not practiced medicine after his immigration to the States but turned to banking business instead, we cannot tell for sure whether he was a beneficiary of the 1952 Act and was actually admitted into the country as a professional. Thus it is more likely that Jane's family entered the United States in the mid 1940s. But whether Jane's family immigrated to the States in the 1940s or in the 1950s, one thing we know for sure is that the U.S. policies towards Chinese immigrants during this period and in the 1960s affected the self-perception of Jane's family as Chinese in America.

¹² Chinese immigrants, together with other Asians, were able to immigrate to the United States in large scale and live a better life after 1965. *Crossings* was published in 1968. Thus the recollection in this narrative is about Chinese immigrants' lives before 1965, that is, when life was still not very easy for them. The Chinese Exclusion Act (passed on May 6, 1882) was repealed by the 1943 Magnuson Act, which permitted Chinese nationals already residing in the country to become naturalized citizens. It also allowed a national quota of 105 Chinese immigrants per year, although large scale Chinese immigration did not occur until the passage of the Immigration Act of 1965. See Gabriel J.Chin, "Segregation's Last Stronghold: Race Discrimination and the Constitutional Law of Immigration." *UCLA Law Review* 46.1(1998).

¹³ Karen Lee, *Prosthetic Texts*, 87-88.

¹⁴ Karen Lee, *Prosthetic Texts*, 117.

¹⁵ Originated in China, Confucianism is a complex system of moral, social, political, philosophical and quasi-religious thought that has had tremendous influence on the government, society, education, and family of East Asia. In practice, the elements of

Confucianism accumulated over time and matured into the following forms: humaneness, righteousness, ritual propriety, wisdom, faithfulness, and filial piety. See John H. and Evelyn Nagai Berhtrong, *Confucianism: A Short Introduction*. Oxford: Oneworld, 2000; Xinzhong Yao, *An Introduction to Confucianism*. Cambridge: Cambridge U P, 2000.

¹⁶ Amy Ling is the one who initiated such a view, as she argues in her milestone essay “A Rumble in the Silence: *Crossings* by Chuang Hua”: “Because of the many crossings that require her adjusting and readjusting to different cultures and languages, and perhaps because she is a middle child and female, Jane seeks a stable unchanging center outside herself. The closeness of her parents, their stability and unity, has been one of the main pillars of her life...” (31). Some scholars have supported Ling’s argument on this issue. See also Yichin Shen, 280; Veronica Wang, 28.

¹⁷ Pierre Do-Dinh, *Confucius and Chinese Humanism*. Funk & Wagnalls, New York. 1969.

¹⁸ In practice, filial piety has been extended by analogy to a series of five relationships: sovereign to subject, parent to child, husband to wife, elder to younger sibling, and friend to friend. See Xinzhong Yao, *An Introduction to Confucianism*. Cambridge: Cambridge U P, 2000. 202.

¹⁹ Karen An-Hwei Lee. *Prosthetic Texts/Phantom Originals: Translations of Cultural Consciousness in Theresa Cha, Chuang Hua, Sui Sin Far, Kazuo Ishituro, and Virginia Woolf*. Diss. U of California, Berkerley, 2001. Ann Arbor: UMI, 2001. 3019717. 88.

²⁰ 1,950 million Chinese now practice various religions such as Animism, Taoism, Confucianism, and Buddhism, in syncretism, with a few million Christians and Muslims.

See Ye Xiaowen "China's Religions Retrospect and Prospect," 11 October 2002. 19 August 2008 <China.org.cn>.

²¹ Karen An-Hwei Lee. *Prosthetic Texts/Phantom Originals: Translations of Cultural Consciousness in Theresa Cha, Chuang Hua, Sui Sin Far, Kazuo Ishituro, and Virginia Woolf*. Diss. U of California, Berkeley, 2001. Ann Arbor: UMI, 2001. 3019717. 81.

²² Li Shu-yan, 109.

²³ See "Tai Chi for Health Purposes." *National Center for Complementary and Alternative Medicine*. 25 Feb 2009. 16 Mar 2009 <<http://nccam.nih.gov/health/taichi>> and "Taoism" 1995. *Religious Tolerance.org*. Ontario Consultants on Religious Tolerance. 12 Nov 2008 <<http://www.religioustolerance.org/taoism.htm>>.

CHAPTER III

PERFORMING (UN)DESIRABLE HOMES IN BHARATI MUKHERJEE'S *JASMINE*

I am convinced now that you can't straddle the fence – that if you're going to not remain an expatriate, then there has to be a traumatic, painful kind of break with the past. After that you might reclaim little bits and pieces of it and fit them into your new life in a different way, but there is no easy, painless way to make the change; otherwise, you're burrowing in nostalgia.

– Bharati Mukherjee, “A Usable Past: An Interview with Bharati Mukherjee”

Jasmine, generally considered as Bharati Mukherjee's best-known work, is an immigration narrative about an India woman named Jyoti who makes her way to the United States and experiences a series of transformations. Although Mukherjee highlights in *Jasmine* her protagonist's rapid Americanization through identity performances and changes, the focus of this chapter is on how the idea of home is performed to register such a process of assimilation. In *Gender Trouble* (1990), Butler suggests that gender acts are social actions that are at once a reenactment and re-experiencing of a set of meanings already socially established (180). I would say that individuals' various acts of homemaking are also social actions. Homemaking is a series of performances that reenact rituals, customs, familial and social structures. As a result, the home registers homemakers' identity on personal, social and cultural levels. In *Jasmine*, Mukherjee not only is skillful in her rendering of such “home identity” but also performs the idea of home to the extent that only certain aspects of the home are revealed. Different from Chuang Hua who depicts in *Crossings* Chinese migrants trying to cling to the “authentic”

ancestral home pattern and relics of the original culture, Mukherjee presents a quite different scenario of immigrant homemaking in *Jasmine*, in which the title character desires and makes her home based on the mainstream American model. Instead of being ethnically “authentic” and static against change, Jasmine’s diasporic home is informed by American spirit in her eagerness and determination to fit in the mainstream American society. I would suggest that Mukherjee’s protagonist consciously performs both a bleak ancestral home and a desirable mainstream American home as she indicates what choices immigrants should make in their homemaking in order to strike roots and thrive in the adopted countries. Contrary to what some Asian American critics have argued,¹ however, I suggest that Mukherjee’s protagonist is not merely an assimilationist in her hurriedness to become American. Instead, she appropriates the American home model for her own benefit and performs a home that expands the mainstream pattern to include immigrants.

Mukherjee declares that immigrants must have “a traumatic, painful kind of break with the past” in order to belong in the adopted land (37). Her unequivocal declaration of cultural identification and identity informs *Jasmine* and the title character’s performances of the diasporic home. Or I would say the performative stance in *Jasmine* is a manifestation of Mukherjee’s maturation as a writer of immigration narratives. In some way, the title character in *Jasmine* is the writer surrogate who articulates the writer’s ideas about assimilation and immigrant homemaking that have much to do with Mukherjee’s immigration experience in Canada and the United States. A brief introduction about Mukherjee and her immigration narratives, therefore, will shed light on the performances of the diasporic home in *Jasmine*.

Bharati Mukherjee: An Immigrant Writer Who Lets Go of Her Roots

Born into an upper-middle-class Hindu Brahmin family in Calcutta, Mukherjee attended school in India (also partly in England and Switzerland) and got her master's degree. She then came to the United States and earned an M.F.A. in creative writing. After graduation, Mukherjee moved to Canada with her husband and became a full professor. As Guiyou Huang introduces in *The Columbia Guide to Asian American Literature since 1945*, Mukherjee became "disillusioned with Canada's treatment of immigrants" and finally moved back to the United States with her family (45).

Mukherjee considers Canada much less tolerant to immigrants. As she recalls, dark-skinned people like herself were "routinely physically harassed, spat on" when she was living in Canada (Cawelti 102). In an interview with Scott Cawelti, she attributes this to Canada's multiculturalist policies of treating immigrants:

Canada has a mosaic system of emigration which I'm sure was originally well-intentioned but in practice (post-1972) has worked to the physically violent disadvantage of brown-skinned and black-skinned immigrants so that the mosaic system insists that you hang on to your cultural heritage, your language. You think of yourself only as a guest worker even if you've been there three generations in Canada. (101-02)

Contrasting with the unfriendly Canada, Mukherjee considers the United States as a better place for people of color than most other countries in the world. She says in an interview:

In the U. S. I feel I am allowed to see myself as an American. It's a self-

transformation. Canadians... resisted my vigorous attempts to see myself as a Canadian. They exclude, America includes. And everywhere else, in Europe, France, Germany, Switzerland, the newcomer is a guest worker... To be a Swede, a German, a Frenchman is a quality of soul and mind that takes hundreds of generations. (*qtd. in* Monagan 1988, 1E)

Obviously, Mukherjee had not taken into account the U.S. history of immigration exclusion and exploitation when she gave the above interview. It is no wonder that such a perspective earns her some academic criticism. Ketu Katrak's observations in "South Asian American Literature" (1997) are representative of such disapproval: "simply to assert that because all Americans do come from elsewhere they are all equal is naïve. One need only consider African Americans and the shameful history of slavery, or the nightmare of Japanese American internment camps, and so on. These stories constitute the 'soul' of America" (213-14). Katrak points out that the "power mechanisms that lie behind such systematic methods of oppressing particular racial groups remain ultimately marginal in Mukherjee's work" (214). I agree with Katrak that Mukherjee has sidestepped the unpleasant U.S. immigration history in her interview and immigration fiction. However, Mukherjee's stance reveals a striking feature of her immigration narratives: a performative approach to immigration and cultural identity. By "performative" I mean Mukherjee is selective in her representation of immigration history and immigrant lives and overemphasizes immigrants' agency (or lack of agency) in their cultural adaptation and transformation. In *Jasmine*, for example, Mukherjee focuses on the title character's resourcefulness in her Americanization and homemaking rather than giving a realistic account of the immigrant life on a full scale. Accordingly, I

would suggest that the setting of Mukherjee's narratives might be metaphorical. No matter where her stories may take place, one thing remains unchanged: these narratives draw on Mukherjee's own immigration experience and convey her ideas about immigration. In other words, the setting of her immigrant fiction may also be "performed."

Mukherjee defines herself and expects to be defined as an American writer. Such a declaration could be interpreted in different ways and has resulted in much academic criticism. In addition to conveying a desire to belong, Mukherjee's self-definition can be a political stance against ethnic inequality. As Mukherjee says in an interview: "Issues of identity as a writer and nationality are very important to me. And in that I say very unequivocally that I am an American writer and that the hyphenization is really a way to marginalize non-European writers" (Cawelti 101). But many scholars consider Mukherjee's declaration as a denial of her Indian heritage. That is where Mukherjee has received the most criticism from the academia, especially from Indian scholars and South Asian American critics.² Inderpal Grewal, for example, takes Mukherjee to task for being ambiguous about her Indian origin: "While Mukherjee is on record as saying that she wants to be called an American rather than an Asian-American, her claims to an Indian national identity are not so clear. Thus when speaking of her past, she has identified herself as being from Calcutta, being Bengali, or being Hindu and upper-caste rather than Indian" (69). Indeed, Mukherjee seems to advocate letting go of one's roots in order to belong in a new culture. As she says in an interview, "if you're going to not remain an expatriate, then there has to be a traumatic, painful kind of break with the past" (Desai

141). It is no wonder that Mukherjee's articulation of her cultural identification is unsettling to many immigrants and immigrant writers and critics.

Mukherjee's experience as a first-generation immigrant, specifically the contrasting feelings she has about her life in Canada and in the United States, accounts for such controversial understanding of cultural identity and the way she portrays her immigrant characters. Mukherjee admits the autobiographical elements of her works in an interview with Shefali Desai and Tony Barnstone: "I wasn't aware until I came to write *The Holder of the World* that there was any autobiographical impulse – let alone element – in my work. I thought I was writing about people who were totally outside of me. I realize now that each of the novels is sort of a way station in my personal Americanization" (132). Hence there is a likeness between her fictional characters and herself. As she says, "I think that most writers, like actors, have to dig inside themselves for the passions of their characters.... So I feel that I am invested, metaphorically, in every single character in each of the books" (132).

From her immigrant narratives we can discern the progression of Mukherjee's views about immigration: from displacement at the beginning of the diasporic journey to adaptation and assimilation. *The Tiger's Daughter* (1971), *Wife* (1975) and *Jasmine* (1989), in particular, are three "way stations" in such immigration experiences.³ More importantly, these works are informed by Mukherjee's different views about Canadian and American immigration practices. As biographer Fakrul Alam observes, these writings mirror Mukherjee's personal experience and feeling as an Indian immigrant, in particular, her own struggle with cultural identity first as an Indian expatriate in Canada and then an immigrant in the United States (10).⁴

The Tiger's Daughter, Mukherjee's first novel, suggests that immigrants are likely to lose their cultural heritage no matter whether they have assimilated in the mainstream society of their receiving countries. The novel is about Tara Cartwright's trip to India after having been away from her homeland for seven years. Tara was born and raised in an upper-class Brahmin family in Calcutta, finished her college education in New York and has married an American. When homesickness prompts her to return to India alone in the summer while her husband David is writing a book, Tara has not experienced the expected sense of homecoming upon landing on the Indian soil. Instead, she experiences a culture shock and has to readjust to her home culture.

As Anupama Jain observes in her dissertation entitled *Hybrid Bildungs in South Asian Women's Writing: Meena Alexander, Bharati Mukherjee, and Bapsi Sidhwa Re-Imagine America*, *The Tiger's Daughter* indicates that immigration has put Tara in an in-between situation (116). On the one hand, she "felt discrimination" in the United States with the realization that Americans do not "appreciate her Indian heritage" (*The Tiger's Daughter* 11). On the other hand, she is shocked to find that she can no longer fit in the Indian culture. With the prevalent poverty, raging religious riots, strikes and political turmoil, her homeland is not as peaceful and beautiful as she remembers. Although she is finally at home "among the ordinary" rather than being an ethnic minority in the United States, Tara does not feel "rested" (*The Tiger's Daughter* 34). In her eyes the Indian landscape "seemed merely alien and hostile" (*The Tiger's Daughter* 25) and she seems to share her husband's view of Calcutta that he describes in his letter as "the collective future in which garbage, disease, and stagnation are man's estate" (*The Tiger's Daughter* 201). Tara also finds that her friends and relatives have displayed a strong class and caste

consciousness that is no better than the racial prejudice she has experienced abroad. Therefore, she has “an alarming new feeling that she was an apprentice to some great thing or power” that is the Indian culture (*The Tiger's Daughter* 130).⁵

The Indian trip gives Tara a chance to think over her current life as an immigrant. She realizes that she has been unable to overcome the ethnic barrier in America due to the general unfriendliness to immigrants. She even “could not trust herself to explain” Calcutta to her American husband because “some things could not be explained” (*The Tiger's Daughter* 126). Unable to find her place in either Indian or American culture, Tara is at a loss. She wonders: “perhaps I was too impulsive, confusing my fear of New York with homesickness, or perhaps I was going mad” (*The Tiger's Daughter* 21). Although at the end of the narrative, Tara has decided to return to her husband in New York, her decision is not because of the “promise of the American dream,” but rather out of “romantic love” for her husband (Jain 117). Tara wonders if she does not return, “whether David would know that she loved him fiercely” (*The Tiger's Daughter* 210). As Jain observes, the “emphasis on the romantic motivation at the conclusion of the novel” distinguishes it from Mukherjee's subsequent immigration narratives (117).

Mukherjee is suggesting in *The Tiger's Daughter* that immigration experience transforms people's world views and ways to define their cultural identities. Although it is likely that immigrants have not assimilated in the mainstream society of their host countries, as it is the case with Tara who still experiences discrimination and is intimidated by the violence in New York, Mukherjee indicates that these individuals will hardly be at home again in their home culture. Admittedly, we may argue that some migrants, such as transnational individuals, may shuttle between cultures and feel equally

at home in each of their residing countries and cultures. In addition, immigrants are more likely to have a stronger sense of homecoming if the situations in their home countries are better than what is depicted in *The Tiger's Daughter*. But such scenarios are not the concern in Mukherjee's novels and thus do not contribute to her views about immigration.

As is shown in *The Tiger's Daughter*, the depiction of Tara's unfulfilling homecoming paves the way for and justifies Mukherjee's point of view about immigration in her subsequent novels, which I will discuss later in detail. For now we can only say that Tara will no longer claim India as home. Therefore, *The Tiger's Daughter* covers one aspect of immigration experience: immigrants have to come to terms with, and most likely abandon or lose, their ancestral home and cultural heritage.

Mukherjee's second novel *Wife* reflects in a different context how some immigrants negotiate their cultural heritage and make the home in a new country. In particular, it further illustrates the necessity for immigrants to flee from the confinement of the ancestral home and immigrant community for successful assimilation. *Wife* is a story about a Bengali woman named Dimple Dasgupta who immigrates to New York with her husband Amit shortly after their marriage. By tracing Dimple's daily life and psychology in a new culture, Mukherjee shows that Dimple is trapped within her own Indian home in America and is unable to break the tradition and participate in the mainstream American life. Suppression, isolation and despair finally drive Dimple mad, and she murders Amit, the primary cause of all her frustration and victimization. Therefore, unlike Tara who finds "home" in her romance with her American husband,

Dimple must make a violent break with the suffocating Indian tradition and the immigrant community in an attempt to move into the mainstream western culture.

As Katrak contends in "South Asian American Literature"(1997), *Wife* is a narrative of the immigrant who is "not really at home anywhere" (212). Neither the tradition nor the new culture accommodates and empowers Mukherjee's protagonist. At the beginning, Dimple is an Indian woman disillusioned about marriage. She finds that marriage is quite similar to her life under her parents' roof, only that now she has to care for her husband and mother-in-law instead of listening to her parents. Mukherjee describes Dimple as a woman who tries her best to be a perfect wife in the Indian tradition – pretty, submissive and passive, whereas Amit is depicted as a typical patriarchal Indian husband. The suppression of Indian women in marriage and by tradition is evident here. It is no wonder that Dimple eagerly awaits the approval of her husband's immigration application so that she may escape India and have a new life somewhere else. After learning that she can finally emigrate to New York with Amit, Dimple induces an abortion by skipping rope because "she began to think of the baby as unfinished business. It cluttered up the preparation for going abroad. She didn't want to carry any relics from her old life" (*Wife* 42).

To her surprise and dismay, however, Dimple finds that immigration to New York has not changed her life style. She is still the wife of a patriarchal Indian husband and is still confined to her home. Amit does not allow her to express herself or to make choices, nor does he let her try American things, such as drinking Coke and alcoholic drinks and wearing pants. He curtails Dimple's opportunities to achieve independence by leaving her no money at all, accompanying her everywhere, and bluntly refusing an Indian friend's

offer to have Dimple work as a salesgirl in his company. Amit claims that “One bread winner in the family is quite enough... Besides, Dimple can’t add two and two. She would ruin your business in a fortnight” (*Wife* 61). What Amit expects of Dimple is simply to stay at home and be a traditional Indian wife. Dimple, in turn, is reconciled to being an obedient wife, holding back her own desire to try something new and different. Her only “defiance” is to gulp down a Seven-up at a friend’s house while Amit is temporarily out of the room. In America she remains as unhappy and helpless as she was in India.

Mukherjee’s narrative shows that Dimple’s internalization of the traditional role of Indian women is partly responsible for her misery. Just as is suggested in the title of this novel, Dimple is merely a “wife,” both before and after her immigration to America.

In the narrative, Dimple lives a confined life within the Indian community and associates only with other Indian immigrants. As Katrak observes, “Mukherjee does not allow her protagonist much interaction with the ‘natives.’ Dimple remains in the claustrophobic apartment space or with other Indians. America hardly exists except as a backdrop, a physical location where she finds herself geographically” (212). Indeed, New York City in *Wife* is a metaphorical location. It only exists as a background that is full of violence – “muggings, rape, murder” – in television shows and in other characters’ conversations (85). As a result, the familiar statement “In America, anything is possible” is wryly interpreted by Dimple as “You can be raped and killed on any floor” (*Wife* 129).

Although staying within the safe confinement of her own apartment and the Indian community, Dimple cannot get from her Indian friends the spiritual sustenance and active instruction that she needs about how to succeed and be happy in America.⁶ The Indian men are either as patriarchal as Amit or merely keen to talk about violence, thus

contributing to Dimple's sense of insecurity and an illusion that violence can be an option to solve problems. Among Dimple's women friends, most are traditional housewives who share Dimple's unhappiness in one way or another and are unlikely to offer any constructive suggestions to her. Dimple has attempted to escape from such a stifling life by having an affair, but her lover Milt Glasser turns out to be another patriarchal Indian who attempts to fit her back into the role of the dependent wife that she is eager to escape.⁷ Thus Dimple's feeling of despair and frustration is complete. At the same time, Dimple has never tried to reach out to them for help because her traditional upbringing discourages any disclosure of her inner life. As Katrak puts it, although Dimple "desperately needs help," she is "unable to accept or articulate her needs" (212).

Lacking the agency and resources to integrate into mainstream American society, Dimple feels stifled in her own isolated apartment. She has insomnia and takes to daydreaming and hallucination when Amit is away at work during the day. When she tells her husband "I feel sort of dead inside," he simply ignores her as ever, brushing it aside as homesickness (*Wife* 110). Having no positive conduits, she finds herself "susceptible to violence", thinking of "seven ways to commit suicide in Queens" and imaging herself killing her husband or being killed by him (*Wife* 102; 125). Dimple is literally confined within the birdcage of her marriage and tradition, from which she is increasingly anxious to get out and "save herself" (*Wife* 191). Eventually, killing her husband seems Dimple's only means to break out. Obviously, Dimple has paid dearly for her seeming success. Just as suicide is never a positive means for women to rebel against tradition, Dimple incurs her own doom by resorting to violence for the sake of her emancipation.

In this tragic story of an Indian woman who yearns for a new life in America but does not know how to achieve it, Mukherjee indicates that immigrants need agency and resources for successful cultural transformation because immigration does not necessarily lead to transformation and empowerment. In Dimple's case, she has to triumph over the "practice of arranged marriage and the repressive conformity of the immigrant community" in order to make the cultural transition (Koshy 141). Her reconciliation to both, however, cancels out her chance of successful transformation and homemaking. Even though she eventually resorts to violence as her means for self-assertion, she is ill-informed by her fellow immigrants and by the media (of using violence to attempt any solutions), and thus fails to "constructively engage existing narratives" for immigrant assimilation (Koshy 143). Therefore as an ill-informed and weak character, Dimple can never make it in America. As Susan Koshy argues in "The Geography of Female Subjectivity: Ethnicity, Gender, and Diaspora" (1998), Dimple's murder is not an act of emancipation but "a symptom of her collapse" (143).

Mukherjee's narrative suggests that immigrants, especially immigrant women, should not cling to their cultural heritage, on both personal and community levels, if they are determined to assimilate. In particular, she indicates that the home model offered by immigrants' ancestral culture is oppressive for women. The Indian home in *Wife*, for example, is patriarchal and deprives women of their independence and individuality. Similarly, the immigrant community confines and denies rather than liberating and empowering women. As Koshy observes, Mukherjee highlights from the perspective of a wife "the production of ethnic identity as a patriarchal construct within the immigrant community" (142). Therefore, *Wife*, Mukherjee's second novel, further illustrates the

necessity for immigrants to flee from the confinement of the ethnic home and community for a successful transformation and homemaking in the receiving countries.

I would like to reiterate that Mukherjee's views about immigration are related to her own experience as an immigrant in Canada. Although both *The Tiger's Daughter* and *Wife* are set in the United States, they were written in the context of Canada's mosaic immigration policy in the 1970s. As I suggested earlier, Mukherjee believes that such a system is to immigrants' disadvantage in its practice because diasporic individuals are obliged to hang on to their cultural heritage and their language and do not have a sense of belonging in the country (Cawelti 102). Although Mukherjee sets both stories in New York City, the setting is merely metaphorical (of a Canadian city). As Mukherjee says about *Wife*, "in the mind of the heroine, it is always Toronto" ("*An Invisible Woman*" 39). We can discern from both narratives some effects of the mosaic policy: isolated immigrant communities, violence and immigrants' sense of insecurity, to name a few. Therefore, Mukherjee's Canadian experience as an Indian expatriate contributes significantly to her initial understanding of immigration and identity transformation. She indicates that no matter where they have settled down, immigrants should move away from their heritage culture and (be encouraged to) participate in the mainstream culture for successful assimilation and homemaking. Later, Mukherjee incorporates such understanding with her own Americanization in portraying some Indian immigrants in *Jasmine*, a culmination of her immigration narratives. Mukherjee not only articulates her understanding of immigration as a mature immigrant writer in *Jasmine* but also is able to perform such views in the way she depicts the various types of homes her title character has had, witnessed or determined to make before and after the diaspora.

Jasmine and Performances of (Un)Desirable Homes

Jasmine (1989), Mukherjee's third novel, tells the story of how an Indian girl named Jyoti resists the traditional oppression of women in an Indian village and finally makes her way to the United States as an illegal immigrant and experiences a series of cultural transformations. Compared with *The Tiger's Daughter* and *Wife*, *Jasmine* demonstrates Mukherjee's different characterization of identity transformation and diasporic homemaking. Instead of portraying bewildered and failed immigrants, Mukherjee's protagonist in *Jasmine* is resolute, active and resourceful in facing the same complexity of immigration experience. Furthermore, the title character is able to avoid the immigrant victimization, which is the fate of the protagonists of *The Tiger's Daughter* and *Wife*, by breaking from her cultural heritage, staying away from the suffocating immigrant community, participating in the mainstream American life and making a home following the American model for her self-fulfillment. Therefore, *Jasmine* is Mukherjee's ideal immigrant, open to challenge and striving for her own happiness and freedom. By the time she wrote *Jasmine*, Mukherjee had settled down in the United States and become an American citizen. As she says in an interview with Shefali Desai, she has drawn on her personal Americanization and passions as an immigrant when composing the novel (132). Hence *Jasmine* is also Mukherjee's celebration of the melting pot of the United States in contrast to the mosaic Canada.

The novel *Jasmine* derives from a short story with the same title that was included in *The Middleman and Other Stories* (1988). "Jasmine" is about a Caribbean woman of Indian origin who is active and resourceful in her determination to fit in the American life. According to Mukherjee, she creates this Caribbean character in an attempt to

combat V. S. Naipaul's view of immigrant victimization and social determinism,⁸ that is, immigrants from the Third World are destined for failure because of their disadvantaged origin (Ponzanesi 34). As she explains in an interview:

I very deliberately set the story in V. S. Naipaul's birthplace because it was my "in" joke, challenging, if you like, Naipaul's thesis of tragedy being geographical. Naipaul's fiction seems to suggest that if you are born far from the center of the universe you are doomed to an incomplete and worthless little life. You are bound to be, if you are born like a Jasmine, an Indian in the Caribbean, a comic character, you come to nothing. So I wanted to say, "Hey, look at Jasmine. She is smart, and desirous, and ambitious enough to make something of her life. (Connell 26-27)

Jasmine signals a deliberate and significant transition in Mukherjee's fiction: from the disclosure of immigrants' dislocation and dilemma to a celebration of their adaptation and transformation. There is also a change of tone in *Jasmine*, as Ponzanesi observes: "The ironic tone in Mukherjee's first works ... is replaced in her later phase by a more personal style" (32).

Although *Jasmine* is considered as Mukherjee's best-known novel, its academic criticism has been controversial. A number of postcolonial and feminist critics point out some problematic aspects of Mukherjee's characterization and her views about immigration. They criticize her, for example, for her facile representation of immigrant assimilation, unsettling depictions of immigrants' home country and the diasporic community, and her neglect of historical facts such as ethnicity, class, religion and gender. Instead of going into details here about such criticism and taking sides in the

debates, however, I would suggest that the root of such criticism is Mukherjee's performative approach to the subject matter and characterization. In other words, she is selective in her representation of immigrants' ancestral culture and host culture, and plays with her protagonist's performance of desired cultural identity in order to convey the idea of successful cultural transformation.

Although Mukherjee highlights her character's identity performances in *Jasmine*, my focus in this chapter is on another aspect of performance, that is, on how the idea of home is performed. In *Jasmine*, Mukherjee not only is skillful in her rendering of such "home identity" but also performs the idea of home to the extent that only certain aspects of the home are revealed. To be more specific, she plays up the negative aspects of immigrants' ancestral home but sidesteps anything unpleasant about the mainstream western home. She does so, whether consciously or unconsciously, in order to valorize the choices her protagonist makes for personal development and assimilation.

There are three types of performed homes in *Jasmine*. The first is Indian immigrants' communal home. Like many first-generation immigrants such as those in Chuang Hua's *Crossings*, some of Mukherjee's Indian characters have "revived" the ancestral home pattern in America, usually in the form of immigrant community. To fully reveal what kind of home these immigrants have modeled after, Mukherjee also depicts the second type of home, the Indian home (in the immigrants' home country), on the communal and national level. But what Mukherjee advocates in this narrative is the third home pattern, namely mainstream American home. She depicts in great detail how her title character emulates such a home model and performs it successfully to her advantage.

These three types of home are intertwined with two timelines in *Jasmine*: the time past and the time present. When the story begins, the protagonist Jasmine is twenty-four, living with banker Bud Ripplemeyer in Baden, Iowa, and pregnant with their child. Jasmine recalls some important events in her life and thus unfolds the stories in the past both in India and in the United States. The juxtaposition of these two story lines throughout the narrative serves to contrast Jasmine's life before and after her immigration and highlight her choices that have led to her current life in America. As far as homemaking is concerned, such juxtaposition succeeds in revealing the desirability of the American home in contrast to the repressive Indian home and the Indian community. Accordingly, my discussion of immigrant homemaking encompasses two sections: leaving the ancestral home behind and performing the mainstream American home.

Leaving the Ancestral Home Behind

In advocating "a traumatic, painful kind of break with the past" for successful assimilation (Desai 141), Mukherjee indicates that immigrants should abandon their ancestral home. In *Jasmine* the "break with the past" refers primarily to the denial of the Indian home, which we can see from the way the protagonist Jasmine describes India (the immigrants' ancestral home) and the Indian immigrant community in her recollection. Included on Jasmine's list of home denial is also a hybrid pattern that retains elements of immigrants' cultural heritage, as shown in the hyphenated life that Jasmine's adopted son Du Thien leads as a Vietnamese American.

In representing immigrants' ancestral home model, Mukherjee's title character performs the Indian home pattern in both locations (namely in India and the U.S.) to the

extent that only the negative aspects are presented to readers. The Indian home is rendered through Jasmine's account of her life in India before immigration. Her recollection focuses on the village of Hasnapur, Punjab, where she lived with her parents until her marriage at age fourteen, and the city of Jullundhar where she lived for a couple of years after she married Prakash. Jasmine's description of the rural and urban home indicates that India is unfit for living and thus immigration becomes her inevitable choice.⁹

In Jasmine's account, her parental home at Hasnapur is poor, old-fashioned and replete with bitterness. As she recalls, her family has been victim to the Indian partition.¹⁰ Her parents had lived happily in Lahore, "in a big stucco house with porticoes and gardens. They had owned farmlands and shops. An alley had been named after a great-uncle" (41). Like other Punjabi Hindus, Jasmine's parents had to flee to India during the Partition, leaving behind their possessions and a comfortable life in Lahore forever. "God is cruel to partition the country, she [Jasmine's mother] said, to uproot our family from a city like Lahore where we had lived for centuries, and fling us to a village of flaky mud huts" (41). The terrible scene has haunted Jasmine's family:

Mataji, my mother, couldn't forget the Partition Riots. Muslims sacked our house. Neighbors' servants tugged off earrings and bangles, defiled grottoes, sabered my grandfather's horse. Life shouldn't have turned out that way! I've never been to Lahore, but the loss survives in the instant replay of family story: forever Lahore smokes, forever my parents flee. (41)

Relatively safe as the family is in India, Jasmine's father Pitaji blames their change of fortune to Gandhi and feels bitter ever since. In his eyes, the Partition is nothing good

and he even “refused to speak Hindi as well, considering it the language of Gandhi, the man who had approved the partition of Panjab and the slaughter of millions” (42).

Displacement, poverty and frustration have turned Jasmine’s father into a different person so that “Pitaji had been cast adrift in an uncaring, tasteless, corrupt, coarse, ignorant world” (42). Pitaji is one of the displaced Punjabi refugees in India who have seen no improvements in their lives. Instead, they find their lives much worse since Indian independence. Like Jasmine’s family, they have all lost their ancestral homes and possessions. The newly-independent India has not provided them with a prosperous start in life, but rather left them in neglect and poverty, struggling to make ends meet. Hence words such as “Nothing is fair. God is cruel” become a “refrain” Jasmine hears at home (41).

Embittered by nostalgia and poverty, Jasmine’s family follows the traditional patriarchal pattern and some old Hindu customs such as child marriage. When introducing the home that Jasmine and her family had in Hasnapur, Jasmine frequently uses words such as “in our village,” “all over our district,” “us village girls” and “neighborhood women” in the depictions. Jasmine does not mean to single out her own family. Instead, she aims at the community as a whole. In relating her own family to numerous others in the village for their shared old practices and values, Mukherjee’s protagonist seems to imply that Hasnapur is a microcosm of the rural community in India. Therefore, at many places Jasmine’s parental home merges with other homes in Hasnapur and together they produce an image of what the rural India is like: primitive, ignorant and insecure. I would call such an image the performed rural home in India.

The rural Indian home appears backward and primitive. The hand pump has just been put up and freed the villagers from the trudge of drawing water from the well and the river. There is no electricity, no toilets or outhouses in average families including Jasmine's; only rich people such as traders and doctors can afford television sets and "had toilets put up in courtyards" (53). Men and women of ordinary families have to relieve themselves in the bushes.

In addition to poor living conditions, the villagers are depicted as ignorant and primitive. Jasmine recalls seeing her first television picture at the doctor's clinic about "the efficacies of small families and clean hands" (45). She tells readers smugly that she "boiled the river water three and four times, when everyone else just let the mud settle before drinking" (45). In her account, Jasmine usually goes with the women to the bushes in groups to relieve themselves at early morning hours before men get up because, according to Jasmine, "the men in our village weren't saints. We had our incidents. Rape, ruin, shame" (55). Readers cannot help but have the impression that the village men behave like savages with the intent to rape.

The village is a patriarchal place where the women are confined by strict gender norms and subject to family violence. Girls are trained since childhood to fit in with the feminine role, to be compliant, silent and hardworking. Since she was seven, Jasmine was already helping with some chores for her family, such as gathering firewood and kneading and drying buffalo dung for fuel. She was constantly reminded of the do's and don'ts for girls, such as the astrologer's command to the seven-year-old Jasmine: "Go join your sisters ... A girl shouldn't be wandering here [in the woods] by herself"(4).

The village women suffer from family violence. All the Indian villagers seem to take this for granted and make no comments about domestic abuse. Jasmine has heard her mother being beaten by her father “deeper into the night” because her mother insists on Jasmine’s continuing education (51). Her father has been shocked to hear that Jasmine wants to become a doctor, a traditionally male’s profession, and gasps, “the girl is mad ... Blame the mother. Insanity has to come from somewhere. It’s the mother who is mad” (51). Instead of doing anything to resist the physical abuse from a husband who was once a Lahori landlord, Jasmine’s mother simply bears the blows silently and seems happy the next morning that her husband has “come around” and allowed Jasmine to stay in school for a few more years (51).

As we learn from this novel, the village women marry young. This representation attests to the long history of child marriage in India.¹¹ Although Jasmine escaped an arranged marriage when she was twelve, she still got married by her own choice at age fourteen. The married women are burdened with family duties ever since their young marriage. They do the household chores, bear and raise children, and take care of the husband and parents-in-law. Therefore as Mukherjee relates, “In Hasnapur a woman may be old at twenty-two”(15). For Jasmine, this is especially true for women in the countryside because they are often illiterate, passive and submissive. Consequently, they have become ideal brides for many city men: “big-city men prefer us village girls because we are brought up to be caring and have no mind of our own. Village girls are like cattle; whichever way you lead them, that is the way they will go” (46).

Usually the women do not have much education. Jasmine’s elder sisters have merely stayed in school for three years before they are married off. It is evident that

Jasmine is the only exception among the girls who has prolonged the education for a few more years. Her distinctness is a testimony both to her intelligence and personal choice, and to the neglect of women's education on social and cultural levels.

Furthermore, as Jasmine recalls, the village women also contribute to their own oppression by being blind followers of tradition. This means that they are often willing victims of some cruel Indian customs such as "sati," or widow suicide. As Inderpal Grewal puts it, Indian women's "allegiance to their tradition ... exacerbated the violence" against them (66). In this novel, it seems that all widows commit suicide of their own will. A good example is Vimla, a girl from a well-off merchant family at Jasmine's village. Vimla has been happily married following the astrologer's advice, but unfortunately, "When he was twenty-one her husband died of typhoid, and at twenty-two she doused herself with kerosene and flung herself on a stove, shouting to the god of death, 'Yama, bring me to you'"(15). After Jasmine's father died, her mother also tried to throw herself on his funeral pyre but was stopped by her children.

Not only are widows supposed to kill themselves, we learn that suicide seems to be the only option for the village women who have failed to meet the traditional requirements, such as when they do not have dowry or fail to produce any offspring: "All over our district, bad luck dogged dowryless wives, rebellious wives, barren wives. They fell into wells, they got run over by trains, they burned to death heating milk on kerosene stoves" (41).

What is shocking is that the villagers seem to take for granted the death of such women as Vimla, who kills herself in order to join her deceased husband. However, if a widow refuses to commit suicide and enjoys life alone instead, she will be looked down

upon and considered unconventional: "In Hasnapur, Vimla's isn't a sad story. The sad story would be a woman Mother Ripplemeyer's age [Bud's seventy-six-year old mother in America] still working on her shell, bothering to get her hair and nails done at Madame Cleo's" (15).

Jasmine also gives an account of the self-denying life widows are required to live according to Hindu customs. Numerous restrictions are placed on widows, for example, they should move to a separate place and usually are avoided by other people; they cannot wear jewelry, dress up or eat certain food (such as onions, as we read in this novel). The logic behind such a practice is that "they must have sinned to suffer" the loss of the husbands and thus deserve such punishment (97). Therefore, Jasmine describes widowhood in India as a life of "public humility and secret bitterness" (97). As she recalls, after her father's death, her mother willingly reduced herself to such a miserable way of living: "she shaved her head with a razor, wrapped her body in coarse cloth, and sat all day in a corner. I force-fed spoonfuls of rice gruel into her" (61). Later, after Jasmine's husband was killed in a Sikh attack, she also joined her mother in the widow's dark hut, living a life "little better than Mazbis and Untouchables" (96). Considering that she is still in her teens, the widowed Jasmine cannot bear to think about the prospect of living among other older widows for the rest of her life. Thus she grieves: "I felt myself dead in their company, with my long hair and schoolgirl clothes. I wanted to scream, 'Feudalism! I am a widow in the war of feudalism.'" (97).

Jasmine's words are an attack on the unfair treatment of Hindu widows and of Indian women in general. However, an important thing that is left unsaid in the novel is whether these oppressive practices against women are local or national and whether they

are still prevalent today. If we research on Indian tradition, we will find that sati and child marriages have long been banned and largely defunct in India, although a few cases of these practices are still found in remote parts of the country.¹² We may argue that the indiscriminate depiction of these traditions in *Jasmine* is sure to leave an impression that these are still common practices, but actually the depiction is merely a partial and selective picture of India. This leads to my argument that Jasmine is actually performing the image of India in order to prove that immigrants like her must leave such a terrible homeland behind. At the beginning of the narrative, an astrologer in Hasnapur foretells Jasmine's widowhood and exile, claiming her fate is "helpless and doomed" (4). As Anindyo Roy suggests in "The Aesthetics of an (Un)willing Immigrant: Bharati Mukherjee's *Days and Nights in Calcutta and Jasmine*" (1993), Jasmine's life experience in India is a social allegory about Indian women's fate (138). When we look at how women in Jasmine's village are described, we have to agree that this is surprisingly true.

In addition to being backward, patriarchal and oppressive, the rural Indian community in *Jasmine* is a place full of violence. The Indian section of the story before Jasmine's immigration is set in the 1980s when the Sikh separatists were attempting to set up their own independent state and were resorting to violence to pressure the Indian government.¹³ As Jasmine describes, even in the small Punjabi village of Hasnapur "things started to happen. A transistor radio blew up in the bazaar. A busload of Hindus on their way to a shrine to Lord Ganpati was hijacked and all males shot dead at point-blank range" (64). She called these Sikh militants "Kalashnikov- and Uzi-armed terrorists" and witnessed their "vengeful, catastrophic" actions against innocent Hindus, the police and moderates (63). Jasmine's English teacher Masterji, a moderate Sikh who

did not care about customs or politics, was shot in the schoolyard by the Sikh boys' gang for his lack of support for the Sikh nationalist movement (86).

For Mukherjee's protagonist, the Sikh militants are obviously terrorists who are the only cause of all the terror and deaths in the 1980s. In this narrative, nothing is mentioned of how the Indian government and Indian army attacked the Sikhs and how numerous innocent Sikhs suffered and became victims of the government's counter-actions.¹⁴ In this respect, Jasmine's account of that historical period is selective and biased. As Inderpal Grewal argues in *Transnational America: Feminism, Diasporas, Neoliberalisms* (2005), Mukherjee undoubtedly endorses "the Indian state's hegemonic discourse of law and order and security" against Muslims and Sikhs (66). Mukherjee's stance is understandable, however, considering that her protagonist and her family are Hindus, the potential targets of the Sikh militants' actions. But I would suggest that by witnessing and describing such a turbulent time from the perspective of a Hindu girl, Mukherjee has created a simplistic image of India that is violent and full of terrorists. Some South Asian American scholars such as Monica Chiu contend that Mukherjee's depiction of India echoes the colonial explorers' view of the Orient – backward, primitive and violent.¹⁵ When we think about how India, especially the rural India, has been described in *Jasmine*, we have to admit with regret that it is true. Mukherjee's rural India is really violent with internal conflicts and "terrorists," and is backward and primitive with deploring living conditions and cruel traditions and customs against women. It seems self-evident that Jasmine's parental home in the countryside of primitivity, tradition and violence must be left behind.

Compared with the deploring rural home, Jasmine's new home in the city appears perfect. After marriage, Jasmine moved to Prakash's apartment in the city of Jullundhar and seemed to have made a home of her dream: a modern and caring husband who trashed tradition, an apartment in the city far away from the backward countryside, and an independent and care-free life with "no in-laws and no infants to harass" her all day (79). She appeared content to stay at home everyday while her husband was away working two jobs and cramming for his diploma exams. However, as with the description of Jasmine's parental home in the countryside, the focus here is not on the individual Indian home but on the community. Now Jasmine's recollection of her experience in the city seems to suggest that a happy life cannot last long in urban India because the city is no good, either. We may say if Jasmine is performing the Indian home, she is doing so on the communal level rather than on the personal level. Therefore, Jasmine does not linger on how she feels about her own home in the city. Instead, she draws our attention to what the city is like.

In Jasmine's account, there are many social problems in Jullundhar despite the fact that it is rich and modern. First, burglaries were rampant. Popular electronic appliances, especially those from western countries, were burglars' targets. In addition, violence was a common problem in the city as it was in the countryside. After moving to Jullundhar, Jasmine was told that the Sikh "terrorists" were bolder here than the ones in the village: they broke into houses, robbed electronic devices and converted them into homemade bombs "to blow up shops and buses" (88). Furthermore, traders in the city were corrupt. They were engaged in black trade, smuggled and cheated in taxes. Prakash, who worked as a repairman and bookkeeper in an electronics store, was fed up with such social ills.

He claimed: "I've had it up here with backward, corrupt, mediocre fools" (81). That is why he told Jasmine that he wanted for them to "go away and have a real life" (81). He meant to go to the United States for their "real life" because his college teacher Vadhera had immigrated there and encouraged him to apply for an American university. If Jasmine had been content with life in the city as compared with her life in the backward village, Prakash prompted her to come to the realization that Indian cities were not desirable places for the home, either. Unfortunately, Prakash's eventual death in a Sikh bomb attack confirmed such a negative view of India and left Jasmine widowed in the country.

In the end, the astrologer's forecast of Jasmine's "widowhood and exile" has proven true. I suggest that we look at Jasmine's "fate" from two sides. On the one hand, she will be destined to a life of suffering and misery if she remains in India, as is shown in her negative portrayal of the country. We can interpret this as the social fate of average Indian women. On the other hand, Jasmine's rebellious personality and quick-learning ability enable her to shape her own fate, and only by self-exile can Jasmine escape the wretched life of an average Indian woman. To put this in a different way, she can only "re-position" the stars outside India (240). As Koshy observes, "Despite Mukherjee's claim that *Jasmine* provides a bold refutation of V.S. Naipaul's thesis ..., her work offers only a sophisticated paraphrasing of his alleged racial and cultural determinism. Mukherjee makes it quite clear that Jasmine has to travel to America to "make something of her life"; in the Third World she is fated to despair and hardship" (149). Koshy contends that Jasmine is "an American before the fact," therefore her immigration experience "can simultaneously attest to the oppression of India and the liberatory

potential of America” (147). My argument is along similar lines. I suggest that Jasmine’s performative depiction of India indicates the impossibility of a happy life and an ideal home because the country is corrupt and has no future. She has to leave her Indian home behind and immigrate to the United States for her own happiness and freedom.

To sum up, Mukherjee’s protagonist has performed both rural and urban communities in India (in her recollection) to the extent that she portrays only the negative aspects of the country.¹⁶ Such a performative delineation, often characterized as “blackening the image of the mother country” (Rastogi 271), is common among some immigrant writers who intend to valorize their immigrant characters’ choice and justify their cultural transformation.¹⁷ As Koshy argues, “the translations of the past life privilege the language of the present life” (146).

Indeed, Jasmine’s “translation” of the Indian home justifies her decision of immigration. However, Jasmine has not stopped there. She goes on to depict the variety of immigrant homes she has witnessed in America and suggests that except for the mainstream American model, all other types of home immigrants have made are not helpful for their assimilation and success in America. In *Jasmine*, Mukherjee describes the United States as a multicultural society that embraces different ways of existence and immigrant homemaking. Her protagonist has stayed with the refugee women, lived in the Indian community in New York and adopted a Vietnamese boy who maintains a hyphenated existence. However, Jasmine disapproves all those ways of living and homemaking, as we can see from the performed images of such diasporic homes.

First of all, Jasmine disapproves of living as an illegal immigrant or refugee hiding away from the mainstream society. Although she came to America as an illegal

immigrant, she has witnessed how some Kanjobal refugee women are living and determines their way of “homemaking” is not what she wants. On her first few days in America, Jasmine was rescued by Lillian Gordon, a kind Quaker lady, stayed at her house and met the undocumented Kanjobal women Lillian was helping and hiding at her place. Having all lost their husbands and children to an army massacre, these women could not speak any English and barely spoke Spanish. Lillian, their benefactor, taught herself Kanjobal in order to understand and help them better. According to Lillian, “She felt it was the least she could do” (132).

In Jasmine’s eyes, these women are dependent refugees who hide in a communal “home” put aside for them. Admittedly such a depiction is realistic, but it merely presents a partial picture of refugees’ lives. It is true these poor women are unable to communicate with and fit into the mainstream society, and have to keep to “their locked and companionable world” and hide in Lillian’s small house that for them “must have felt like a safe garrison in hostile territory” (134). But at the same time they are learning from Lillian some basic housekeeping skills with the hope to hire themselves out as domestics. It is likely that in time they will be able to make their own living and move out of Lillian’s house. However, Jasmine’s account focuses on these women’s initial days in America, believing that they can never survive independently, let alone make a home of their own. Therefore, such an isolated and dependent way of living is absolutely not what Jasmine wants in America. What Jasmine has left untold is these women’s story after they have finished their “training” and moved out from Lillian’s house. As is introduced in *Jasmine*, Lillian is later charged with “harboring undocumented” and put to jail for “refusing to name her contacts or disclose the names and addresses of the so-called army

of illegal aliens she'd helped 'dump' on the welfare rolls of America" (136-37). This implies that refugees and illegal immigrants, if allowed to stay, are likely to survive and make a home in America in their own ways, but this is not what Jasmine intends to tell us in her account. Instead, by performing an image of how helpless refugees and illegal immigrants are in the United States, she indicates that such a way of living cannot lead to assimilation and happiness in America. Therefore, Jasmine directs readers' attention to her own distinct choice (although she was also an illegal immigrant): making a home after the mainstream American model.

Jasmine is described as unique among illegal immigrants. With her fluent English and quick-learning ability, Jasmine feels herself different from and superior to those refugee women. Lillian, her American benefactor, also regards Jasmine as "a very special case" and lucky thanks to the fact that "India had once been a British colony" (132). Mukherjee seems to suggest that not all immigrants (including both legal and illegal immigrants) can make it in America; only those who are determined to abandon tradition and embrace the western culture can succeed.¹⁸ As is depicted in the narrative, Jasmine keeps away from the refugee women and "their locked and companionable world" (134). An eager student of the American manner and American way of life, she finishes apprenticeship with Lillian, takes her leave and heads for the Indian community in New York where Devinder Vadhera, her deceased husband's college professor, is living. Jasmine arrives at Vadhera's home in the hope that she can begin her American life with him and his family, but she ends up leaving them a few months later because she finds the Indian community is "doom."

The Indian community in Flushing, New York, turns out to be yet another performed image of home that Jasmine aims to denigrate. In Jasmine's account, the Indian community is almost a closed world, a microcosm of the immigrants' home country. Indian way of life is performed on every level in this immigrant community. During the five months when Vadhera put her up with his family, Jasmine had mostly seen Indian faces and was frightened by "all its immigrant services at hand" (145). She recounts that they had "Indian-food stores in the block, Punjabi newspapers and Hindi film magazines at the corner newsstand, and a movie every night without having to dress up for it" (145-46). Jasmine could not help thinking that "Flushing was a neighborhood in Jullundhar" (148). In this community, residents associate with one another in the way they used to do in India: only those with similar religious and regional backgrounds gather. What is more, they hardly speak English or watch American television programs. Communicating with other residents only in her native language, Jasmine found that her English was gradually deserting her. So she complained: "I couldn't understand the soap operas. I didn't know the answers to game shows" (148).

For Jasmine, these residents are performing Indian customs and values. Vadhera's family is a salient example. In his early forties, Vadhera had just saved enough and arranged a marriage with the nineteen-year old Nirmala, fresh from an Indian village. He performed as the patriarchal Indian husband who had the final say in his family and seldom discussed family issues with his wife and parents, while Nirmala acted as a typical Indian wife who was submissive, trusting and hardworking. To Jasmine's amazement, she found out accidentally that Professorji (namely Vadhera) was not a college professor at all, as he had been known to his family and the whole Indian

community in Flushing. Instead, he was an importer and sorter of human hair, working in a rented room in the basement, and he had kept other people, including his wife and his parents, in the dark about this fact. For Jasmine, he “was following an ancient [Indian] prescription for marital accord: silence, order, authority. So was she [his wife]: submission, beauty, innocence” (151).

In this community Jasmine was treated as a widow and had to behave so. First, she had to dress like a widow, thanks to Nirmala who “brought plain saris and salwar-kameez outfits for me from the shop so I wouldn’t have to embarrass myself or offend the old people in case-off American T-shirts. The sari patterns were for much older women, widows ... To them I was a widow who should show a proper modesty of appearance and attitude” (144-45). Furthermore, Jasmine had little chance of making an arranged marriage and becoming a mother because as a widow, although she was barely nineteen, Jasmine was not allowed to meet young people with the purpose of matchmaking marriages. For her, remarriage “was out of the question within the normal community. There were always much older widowers with children to look after who might consider me, and this, I know, was secretly discussed, but my married life and chance at motherhood were safely over” (147).

The performance of an Indian way of life has not brought happiness to the immigrants. Jasmine has seen these Indian residents harbor different complaints. Those who had jobs were struggling for a living, “harassed and foul-tempered” and retiring “behind ghetto walls” everyday (144-145). Vadhera, one of those embittered laborers, felt stressful and always got a little drunk. When he was drunk, he usually complained that “America was killing him”(145). Sadly, Jasmine understood that Vadhera had only

managed to survive as an Indian in New York, and such survival depended merely on clinging to the ancestral customs and home model and keeping “a certain kind of Punjab alive, even if that Punjab no longer existed. They let nothing go, lest everything be lost” (162). In Jasmine’s terms, Vadhera “needed to work here, but he didn’t have to like it. He had sealed his heart when he’d left home. His real life was in an unlivable land across oceans. He was a ghost, hanging on” (153).

Jasmine finds that elderly Indians were also unsatisfied with their lives. Vadhera’s parents, both in their eighties, had all the old people’s complaints:

we have followed our children to America, and look what happens to us! Our sons are selfish. Our daughters want to work and stay thin. All the time, this rush-rush. What to do? There are no grandchildren for us to play with. This country has drained my son of his dum. This country has turned my daughter-in-law into a barren field. (147-48)

Clinging to the traditional way of life and unwilling to reach out to the mainstream society, the immigrants find themselves encumbered by their cultural heritage and out of place in America. However, instead of seeking positive ways to make a change in their lives, they simply blame their receiving country for all this suffering and unhappiness. Living in such a community, Jasmine was not happy, either. She stayed in Vadhera’s apartment, helping with the housework and keeping his elderly parents company. She describes her monotonous life in this way:

I felt myself deteriorating. I had gained so much weight I couldn’t get into the cords even when I tried. I couldn’t understand the soap operas. I didn’t know the answers to game shows. And so I cooked, shopped, and cleaned, tended the

old folks, and made conversation with Professorji when he got home. (148) Jasmine felt that she was “spiraling into depression behind the fortress of Punjabiness” and deplored that “in Flushing I felt immured. An imaginary brick wall topped with barbed wire cut me off from the past and kept me from breaking into the future. I was prisoner doing unreal time” (148). We are not surprised when Jasmine finally decided to leave Professorji and the Indian community, calling Kate Gordon-Feldstein for help and subsequently beginning her desired process of becoming American.

The Indian community in this narrative echoes the one that Mukherjee depicts in her earlier novel *Wife*. Both communities are suffocating places for the residents, especially for the female protagonists. We may argue that by describing such unhappy and doomed Indian communities in the United States, Mukherjee indicates that clinging to the Indian way of living can never lead to happiness and success in America; immigrants should abandon the ancestral home pattern and keep away from the ethnic community if they want to assimilate. Some scholars find such implication about the immigrant community in Mukherjee’s writing disturbing. Sangeeta Ray, for example, observes in “The Nation in Performance: Bhabha, Mukherjee and Kureishi” that in Mukherjee’s fiction “becoming American demands a rejection of both community and a politics of collectivity” (230). Inderpal Grewal argues that Mukherjee has misrepresented the community networks, which are “only virulent and abusive” in *Jasmine* but actually have been very instrumental in helping relatives, neighbors, and villagers in their migration by providing “support, money, information, and the means to travel” (68). I would suggest that the immigrant community in *Jasmine* is significant in helping its residents and other immigrants to settle down, but an implication in *Jasmine* is that such

an isolated community life is not helpful or constructive for immigrants' transformation and assimilation. As Jasmine comments on the aid that Professorji has kindly extended to her:

They had taught me a great deal about surviving as an Indian in New York. If I had been a different person with a different set of experiences – if I had been another Nirmala, as they'd expected – then Professorji's lesson would be life-affirming, invaluable, inexpressibly touching. They had kept a certain kind of Punjab alive, even if that Punjab no longer existed. They let nothing go, lest everything be lost. (162-63)

Admittedly, Mukherjee has suggested in her immigrant narratives “a rejection of both community and a politics of collectivity” in becoming American (Ray 230), but I would qualify this argument by saying that her fictional characters are not against all communities but are only opposed to the isolated ethnic community that hinders immigrants' Americanization. In *Jasmine*, Mukherjee's protagonist performs the immigrants' communal home by highlighting its detrimental influence on her in order to drive such a point home.

Jasmine also expresses her disapproval of immigrants' hyphenated existence for the same reason: immigrants' insistence on tradition will not lead to happiness and success in America, even if their lives are half traditional, half American (as is defined by the self-identifying term of “hyphenation”). Du Thien, a Vietnamese boy that Jasmine and Bud have adopted, maintains a hyphenated life. According to Jasmine, he is “in a hurry to become all-American” and is learning and transforming rapidly in the three years after his arrival (29). Jasmine has witnessed his change and seen in him the reflection of her

own fast transformation. However, when she eventually learns that Du has “made a life for himself among the Vietnamese in Baden,” Jasmine is more amazed than proud of him because she is against such a hyphenated way of living (222). Her disapproval is evident when she says: “We were so full of wonder at how fast he became American, but he’s a hybrid, like the fantasy appliances he wants to build. His high-school paper did a story on him titled: ‘Du (Yogi) Ripplemeyer, a Vietnamese-American...’” (222). Before Du decides to leave Iowa to join his sister in California, Jasmine has never heard him speak Vietnamese or seen him bring home any of his Vietnamese friends. Therefore she “hadn’t had a clue” and perhaps does not care to find out whether Du has been associating with the Vietnamese in town (220). The only time when Du brought home a Vietnamese friend named John, who had helped to find the address of Du’s sister, Jasmine suspected that John was a drug pusher from Vietnam.

In contrast, Jasmine cares about what community she wants to belong in. In Butler’s terms, Jasmine performs the idea of the communal home. Jasmine’s friend circle is quite different from Du’s. Since she disapproves how Indian immigrants are living in the New York ghetto, Jasmine has stopped associating with almost all Indians afterwards: “aside from my Dr. Jaswani and from Dr. Patel in *Infertility*, I haven’t spoken to an Indian since my months in Flushing. My transformation has been genetic” (222). Arnold Harrichand Itwaru notes that Mukherjee’s “America-the-good” is “white America” because her protagonist takes care only to make friends with white people (Grewal 73). To make herself and her home more American, Jasmine seems to only welcome white men rather than men of color. Consider the lovers Jasmine has had: Taylor Hayes (professor in Columbia University, white, Jasmine’s lover) and Bud Ripplemeyer (banker in Baden,

Iowa, white, Jasmine's common-law husband). Although she has not said she is only looking for a white man as an acceptable marriage partner, Jasmine is doing exactly this. It is true that Jasmine's endorsement of the white America suggests her rejection of hyphenated identity, but it also indicates her rejection of multiculturalism due to her desire of a genetic transformation. Thus some critics find Mukherjee's representation of immigrant assimilation unsettling. As Inderpal Grewal observes, Mukherjee's "quest for inclusion within the [American] nation" cannot be done "on the basis of multiculturalism grounded in race" (71). Such cultural identification reflects Mukherjee's understanding of immigration and cultural identity, which I introduced earlier in this chapter. In some way, Mukherjee's novels are a sort of fictional verification of her own experiences and beliefs.

Thus this novel conveys a significant message: immigrants should break with the past and their cultural heritage in order to fit in and have a "genetic transformation" (222). I suggest that this is an extension of the idea that Mukherjee indicates in her first two novels *The Tiger's Daughter* and *Wife*: immigrants no longer belong in their native country and ancestral culture after their diasporic journey. Although this view was implied and incipient in her previous novels, Mukherjee further develops and performs it skillfully through her protagonist in *Jasmine*. Mukherjee suggests that breaking with the past is an inevitable part of immigrants' cultural transformation. As her title character says, "Once we start letting go – letting go just one thing like not wearing our normal clothes, or a turban or not wearing a tika on the forehead – the rest goes on its own down a sinkhole" (29). Jasmine is eager to shed her past and anything related to it. She stops associating with other Indians and tries her best to avoid talking about her past and about India. Jasmine even sees her own Indianness as "foreignness," is "frightened" by it

herself and is eager to change (26). She explains herself in this way: "I changed because I wanted to. To bunker oneself inside nostalgia, to sheathe the heart in a bulletproof vest, was to be a coward" (185). For Jasmine, as well as for Mukherjee, transformation is an essential step for survival in a new culture. Such transformation is a painful, sometimes even violent process. According to Jasmine, "there are no harmless, compassionate ways to remake oneself. We murder who we were so we can rebirth ourselves in the images of dreams" (29).

Logically, breaking with the past and repudiating both the isolated and hyphenated/multicultural models of living and belonging in America lead to the life style and home pattern that Mukherjee's protagonist in *Jasmine* has chosen: the mainstream American home. The indication is that immigrants can survive and succeed only by living in the mainstream American community and by adopting and performing the western idea of the home.

Performing the Mainstream American Home

Jasmine's performance of the idea of home operates on two levels: denigrating the ancestral home and emulating and appropriating the American model. In the multicultural America, Mukherjee's protagonist has seen different home patterns and lived in various communities. However, the desire to survive and to belong propels Jasmine to move on, to enter and emulate the mainstream American home that she considers as the epitome of the American spirit. Jasmine's American experience and homemaking reflect the trajectory of immigrants' cultural transformation and at the same time expose some confusion and contradiction during such a transformation. As Jasmine says, "all I wanted

was to serve, be allowed to join, but I have created confusion and destruction wherever I go” (215). Actually she creates the new by destroying the old and the traditional, takes in the American home model but transcends it for her own benefit.

For Mukherjee’s protagonist, to belong in America entails behaving and living like Americans. Therefore, to enter an American home and become its member constitute a significant part of Jasmine’s cultural transformation. She is eager and quick to take in everything that she observes and is instructed to do because she regards all this as manifestations of the American spirit. Therefore, participating in and mimicking the American home is a primary means for her to realize the American dream. Jasmine completes this process by her Florida apprenticeship with Lillian Gordon, observation of Kate Gordon-Feldstein’s home and living with Taylor and Wylie Hayes as a caregiver in New York.

Lillian Gordon is the first American who has come to Jasmine’s rescue and initiates her Americanization. It is Lillian who found the exhausted and injured Jasmine on a dirt trail and took her home after Jasmine had landed in Florida and killed the man who had just raped her. Lillian calls Jasmine “Jazzy” and instructs her how to (literally) perform American, that is, how to dress, walk and talk American. When taking Jasmine to a mall to test the result of the training, Lillian was pleased to find that Jasmine could “pass” as an American. To be a good performer of “Americanness” is the goal that the trainer (Lillian) and the trainee (Jasmine) agreed on for their “Americanization sessions.” As Lillian reminded Jasmine, “Now remember, if you walk and talk American, they’ll think you were born here. Most American can’t imagine anything else” (135). At Lillian’s place, Jasmine also received training to perform basic housework in an American way.

Together with some Kanjobal refugee women Lillian was helping, Jasmine learned how to cook and do some other basic housework in an American way so that “[they] could hire [themselves] out as domestics” (134). Jasmine has been a quick learner, and her English language ability distinguished her from the poor Kanjobal women who did not speak any English. Amazingly, Jasmine mastered all she had to learn in a week’s time and Gordon considers her as “a very special case” (135). Mukherjee indicates here that language and quick-learning ability are among the survival essentials for immigrants. According to Jasmine, Lillian is “a facilitator who made possible the lives of absolute *ordinariness* that we ached for” (131). In other words, Lillian taught Jasmine how to perform the basics of American manners and those of an American home, preparing the latter for a deeper understanding of and participation in American life in her next step.

The second American home that Jasmine entered and benefited from is the home of Lillian’s daughter, Kate Gordon-Feldstein. Jasmine was thrilled at what she had seen at Kate’s huge corner loft:

The incidental clutter was astounding to me, after the order of Professorji’s apartment: chair frames without seats, wet towels on the floor, magazines and newspapers stuffed into a wicker clothes hamper, cardboard containers from a takeout place on the window ledge.

It thrilled me. Sunlight smeared one wall of windows. It spoke to me of possibility, that one could live like this and not be struck down (160).

Such is the image of Jasmine’s ideal home, a home that is flexible. In other words, Jasmine admires the sense of freedom in the American home, that is, freedom of action at home. Such freedom is especially valuable to Jasmine, a woman from the suppressive

nation of India where propriety and rectitude are paramount to the social order. As an Indian woman and, later on, a widow in particular, Jasmine has suffered a lot under Indian social regulations and thus finds the American home all the more desirable. She considers such freedom of action an essential feature of the American home.

Holding Kate's big pet, a marine iguana, Jasmine believed that she had been "reborn": "Indian village girls do not hold large reptiles on their laps. They would scream at the swipe of a dry tongue, the basilisk stare of a beady eye. The relationship of an Indian, any Indian, to a reptile, any reptile, is that of a fisherman to a fish" (163). Thus Jasmine felt that she had abandoned her Indian identity and was becoming American. The spirit of the American home dawned on her at Kate's loft.

According to Jasmine, it was at the Hayes' that she completed her initiation and finally became an American. The Hayes' home attracts her because of the equality between the family members, especially between members of different social statuses. This point came home to her on the first day Jasmine went to live with Taylor and Wylie Hayes as a maid to their adopted child Duff. The couple was very friendly to her. Facing Taylor's smiles, Jasmine found herself falling in love with what he represented to her: "a professor who served biscuits to a servant, smiled at her, and admitted her to the broad democracy of his joking, even when she didn't understand it. It seemed entirely American" (167). She falls in love with his world, "its ease, its careless confidence and graceful self-absorption" (171).

Jasmine admires this particular American home also because of its inclusiveness. This derives from Jasmine's shocking knowledge that Duff was adopted. The couple loves the girl and plans to tell her the truth when she is old enough. We also learn that

they will even let Duff meet her natural mother, currently a sophomore at Iowa State University. As Jasmine explains: "Their lawyer had placed ads in small-town Iowa and Nebraska and Kansas newspapers, asking pregnant unwed girls to contact him. Wylie and Taylor were paying for the girl's education" (170). Adoption is as foreign to Jasmine as the idea of widow remarriage. She cannot imagine a non-genetic child; for her "A child that was not my own, or my husband's, struck me as a monstrous idea" (170). In her eyes, therefore, this American couple is shockingly respectable and the American home appeals to her even more.

For Jasmine the mainstream American home is a microcosm of American democracy and freedom. She is eager to become a member of such a home and perform the qualities that she longs to have. As she says, I "wanted to become the person they thought they saw: humorous, intelligent, refined, affectionate. Not illegal, not murderer, not widowed, raped, destitute, fearful" (171). By living with the Hayeses, Jasmine believes that she has internalized their ideas and way of life and thus has become an American. She summarizes her two years' life with the Hayeses in this way: "I lived with Taylor and Wylie Hayes for nearly two years. Duff was my child; Taylor and Wylie were my parents, my teachers, my family" (165).

However, the ideal American home also has its flip side and sometimes puzzles Jasmine. She finds that in America nothing lasts and such changeability becomes "the hardest lesson of all" for her to learn (181). As she says, "we arrive so eager to learn, to adjust, to participate, only to find the monuments are plastic, agreements are annulled. Nothing is forever, nothing is so terrible, or so wonderful, that it won't disintegrate"(181). She is referring to Wylie's falling out of love with Taylor and in love

with an economist named Stuart Eschelmann who lived in their neighborhood. According to Wylie, Taylor was "such a sweetheart," but she told Jasmine that Stuart was "wonderful" and that her love for Stuart was "the real thing this time" and her "chance at real happiness," therefore she had to "go for it" (181). Jasmine was puzzled by Wylie's affair and her sudden departure with her lover without any consideration for her husband and the adopted girl Duff. Lakshmana Rao calls this the "moral confusion" in American society and considers it shocking to a girl like Jasmine who has been "brought up in a tradition-bound society where marriage is a life-time bond" (75).

I would suggest that Jasmine comes to understand the disintegration of the Hayes family as the result of American individualism. From this incident she also learns that it is justifiable to put personal desires and needs above family considerations. Puzzling and shocking as all this is to her, Jasmine has taken in everything in her eagerness to adjust and to belong, admiring every aspect of the mainstream American home from its freedom and equality to the inclusiveness and priority of individualism. She is eager to perform it herself whenever chance permits.

Jasmine's performance of the mainstream American home begins in Baden, Iowa after she left the Hayeses in New York for her own safety (because she accidentally met in New York the Sikh "terrorist" who had killed her husband in India). If we take her New York experience as a stage at which she completes her initiation and cultural transformation, her life in Iowa is a time when she performs what she has learned, not only making a home that mimics the mainstream American model but also aspiring to transcend it so that immigrants can be admitted in the big American family. Such flexibility of home/identity performance echoes what Butler suggests about the flexibility

of (gender) identity performance. As Butler argues in "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory" (1990), reified and naturalized conceptions of gender "might be understood as constituted and, hence, capable of being constituted differently" (271). Similarly, immigrants' performances of home are acts that embody the home identity in different ways. When Jasmine performs the home of mainstream American pattern, she brings to it her own interpretation and renders her performance a parody of the American home to her advantage. We note that while her assimilation is a violent process in which she repudiates (other home patterns) and murders (the past), Jasmine's home performance is not peaceful, either. She strives to fit in and makes a home in a place that threatens to exclude her, but eventually she abandons the home that she has constructed for something more fascinating and more desirable. In other words, she appropriates and performs the individualism that informs the mainstream American home for her own benefit.

After arriving at Baden, Elsa County, Iowa, Jasmine is eager to make a home of her own that emulates the home pattern she admired and learned in New York. In particular, she tries to perform the inclusiveness and individualism that, she believes, are the spirit of the American home. First of all, Jasmine imitates Wylie and goes for her "chance at real happiness" (181), that is choosing a partner for her home. She makes the acquaintance of a banker named Bud Ripplemeyer at a time when his marriage is at risk. Jasmine claims to be innocent when Bud gets divorced six months later and lives with her, arguing that she is "a catalyst, not a cause" because Bud chose her and she was passive (200). But she also believes that she has brought him back "from a mid-life crisis" by making him happy (200).

I suggest that Jasmine is exercising the principle of “priority of individualism” that she learned in New York by observing how Wylie walked out on Taylor and justified herself. In like manner, Jasmine thinks that she too enjoys freedom in America and can love whomever she wants to regardless of whether or not the man she associates with is married. She wants to be happy herself, and that is all, without considering whether her actions may hurt other people, such as Bud’s ex-wife Karin. She does not feel guilty at all in front of Karin when the latter asks: “I suppose you never asked [Bud], ‘Are you a married man?’ You just batted your big black eyes and told him how wonderful he was, didn’t you?” (204). Rajini Srikanth states unequivocally that Jasmine’s “presence leads to the breakup of two marriages” in spite of her claim of innocence in both cases (164). We may say that Jasmine is self-centered, but, as some critics such as Lakshmana Rao and Liew-Geok Leong contend, Jasmine’s individualism has more to do with immigrants’ desire to survive and succeed than with morality.¹⁹

Amid the moral confusion of America, Jasmine is quick to shed her inherited old Indian attitudes towards love and sex and take in the liberal western idea in the name of individualism, as D. Rao puts it, “almost too readily” (75). She has yielded to Taylor’s sexual advances, comforting him for his desertion by his wife Wylie and meeting her own need for love and the sense of family. As she says, “we – Duff, Taylor, and I – became a small, self-sufficient family... I prayed that Wylie and Stuart would take all the time they needed in Europe, because I, the caregiver, was eager to lavish care on my new, perfect family” (183). After fleeing to Iowa for her personal safety, Jasmine moves in to live with Bud after his divorce and is pregnant with their child by artificial means. But she will not consider his proposal for marriage before the baby comes. According to her,

she still cannot forget the Indian astrologer's forecast of her widowhood. But the fact is Bud has been shot and paralyzed by a desperate farmer named Harlan Kroener. Jasmine puts this fact plainly: "he wasn't in a wheelchair when we met. I didn't leave him after it happened" (7). No matter what she has in mind, she becomes Bud's common-law wife and her current ideas about love and homemaking is quite American. In other words, Jasmine has appropriated and performed the American home pattern and some American values.

After making a home with Bud, Jasmine and Bud adopt the Vietnamese boy, Du Thien, from a refugee camp in Thailand. Du's adoption echoes Taylor and Wylie's adoption of Duff. While she has admired the inclusiveness of the Hayeses' home with an adopted girl, Jasmine is now satisfied with her own Iowa home because of its similar structure. She believes that "all of us Ripplemeyers, even us new ones, belong" (13). It seems that by now Jasmine's performance of the home that she desires is complete and perfect.

We should note, however, that Jasmine's home performance has not been a smooth process, nor is she content to be confined by any existing homes (should she decide to seek a more desirable one), including the one she has made with Bud. Mukherjee seems to suggest that Jasmine's success in performing the American home results from the latter's agency and resourcefulness. Jasmine has to strive to fit in the mainstream American society after she finds that the melting pot of America has lost its magic. As she says: "People were getting a little scared of immigrants and positively hostile to illegals" (137). As an illegal immigrant, Jasmine has seen the "perverted" America upon her arrival in New York: scores of policemen swinging heavy nightsticks in search of

illegal immigrants, black beggars bugging travelers for money and cursing when unsuccessful, the archipelago of ghettos full of bitter aliens... The list can go on endlessly. Regretting that she has "come to America too late," Jasmine determines that she has to be tactful and resourceful in order to fit in and make a home in her dreamland (139). Anxious to hide her illegal status, she asks Professorji to help purchase a fake green card for her, which she believes can bring her freedom and happiness.

Subsequently, she makes tactful use of mainstream society's impression and expectation of immigrants for her own assimilation and homemaking.

In Iowa, Jasmine finds that the farmers are conservative people not very open to outsiders, especially immigrants. With the realization that they do not appreciate anything unfamiliar, she takes care to hide her Indianness and avoid mentioning her Indian past. According to Jasmine, her "genuine foreignness" makes some people uncomfortable and even frightened (26), including her lover Bud and his mother. Yet Jasmine does not resent these people for their conservative attitude, as she says,

Not that she [Mother Ripplemeyer] is hostile. It's like looking at the name in my passport and seeing "Jyo-" at the beginning and deciding that her mouth was not destined to make those sounds. She can't begin to picture a village in Punjab.

She doesn't mind my stories about New York and Florida because she's been to Florida many times and seen enough pictures of New York. I have to be careful about those stories. I have to be careful about nearly everything I say. (16)

Jasmine is eager to fit in, to change and shed her "foreignness" (26). She even alludes to Indians' supposed Aryan origins to show the readiness of her assimilation. She describes the farmers' reaction to her ethnic difference in this way: "They want to make me

familiar. In a pinch, they'll admit that I might look a little different, that I'm a 'dark-haired girl' in a naturally blond county. I have a 'darkish complexion' (in India, I'm 'wheatish'), as though I might be Greek from one grandparent. I'm from a generic place, 'over there,' which might be Ireland, France, or Italy" (33). As Susan Koshy argues, "A mythology of shared origins allows Mukherjee to represent ethnicity, in Jasmine's case, as an attribute that can be shed" (145).

But at the same time Mukherjee represents her protagonist as being able to make strategic use of American society's certain stereotypes of Asian Americans to facilitate her assimilation. To be specific, Jasmine has performed herself as an exotic beauty and, together with Du, as a "model minority."

The depictions in *Jasmine* give us the impression that Mukherjee's protagonist performs the orientalist view of the Asian woman as beautiful, mysterious and submissive. As Jasmine claims, "Bud courts me because I am alien. I am darkness, mystery, inscrutability. The East plugs me into instant vitality and wisdom. I rejuvenate him simply by being who I am" (200). Jasmine seems to contradict herself here considering how eager she has been to shed her Indian past and assimilate. Therefore, I suggest that Jasmine is merely performing certain aspects of immigrants' cultural heritage for her benefit, that is to facilitate assimilation instead of keeping tradition. In a sense, Jasmine succeeds in her Americanization primarily by using her exotic beauty on white men. As Koshy maintains, "exotic beauty becomes the passport to assimilation," therefore many of Mukherjee's female characters, like Jasmine, are "engaged in the process of writing their American experience as a narrative of sexual awakening and material promise, a narrative enabled by their exotic beauty" (147). In *Jasmine*,

Mukherjee's title character performs the Indian beauty and captivates almost every white man she has met. The first time she entered Taylor's home as a maid, Jasmine fell in love with the American life style he represented for her. At the same time, Taylor was also attracted and fell in love with her. But in New York Jasmine unexpectedly spot the man who had killed her husband Prakash in India. She was forced to leave the city and her newly-found love for her own safety. The second man Jasmine meets and attracts is Bud Ripplemeyer. Upon arrival in Baden, Iowa, Jasmine gets a job as a teller with Bud's bank through his mother. Bud describes how he was captivated with Jasmine's beauty the moment he saw her:

I saw you walk in and I felt my life was just opening to me. Like a door had just been opened. There you were in my bank, and I couldn't believe it. It felt as if I was a child again, back in the Saturday-afternoon movies. You were glamour, something unattainable. And you were standing there with my mother. (199)

Thus Jasmine conquers America and its men with her exotic beauty. Even men she is not interested in have a crush on her. A young Baden farmer named Darrel Lutz is also fascinated with her. Darrel plans to sell his farm and move to New Mexico, and he tries to persuade Jasmine to leave the paralyzed Bud and run away with him, although he knows she is pregnant with Bud's baby. As he tells Jasmine, "He doesn't treat *you* right either...I love you... We can leave it together. New Mexico! I can run a radio Shack in Santa Fe" (217).

In all her encounters with men, Jasmine appears passive. She has taken no initiative in her relationship with them, but they all cannot help but love her. Mukherjee seems to account for this as the power of Jasmine's exotic beauty, as well as a trick of fate, and

considers it as her protagonist's success. Jasmine recalls: "I have had a husband for each of the women I have been. Prakash for Jasmine, Taylor for Jase, Bud for Jane. Half-Face for Kali" (197). Although she is referring to the different stages of her identity transformation and assimilation, her remarks still indicate the nature and medium of her transformation: by means of romance with her self-exoticism. Therefore, the manner in which Jasmine views and treats her Indianness is performative and yet problematic. As Koshy observes, "Jasmine's success (financial independence, romance, mobility) is linked to her ability to exoticize some elements of her ethnicity while shedding others, at will" (148). On the other hand, Jasmine's success via romance also distinguishes hers from other classic American success stories in which money, or wealth, is a significant indicator.²⁰

Mukherjee also depicts Jasmine and Du performing Asian Americans' stereotypical role of the "model minority" in their determination to become American. Jasmine says that both she and Du are "quick studies" who have abandoned their cultural heritage, adapt to American culture and assimilate fast (29). We have seen how fast Jasmine has learned to dress, talk and walk American in seven days, how fast she has moved away from the Indian community and its traditional way of living, and how fast she has taken in the spirit that informs mainstream American home and makes her own home in like manner. Du is another "quick study" in the novel. Like Jasmine, he is quick at learning English after his arrival in the United States, from a boy who could barely speak English when he came from a refugee camp in Thailand at age fourteen to a fluent English speaker who can now match his American friends "shout for shout" in daily conversation, although "with a permanent accent" (18). Du is doing well in school and is fascinated

with American technology, which also has to do with his quick learning ability.

According to Jasmine, this is all for survival, considering that Du has survived “every degradation known to this century”: he has lived through “five or six languages, five or six countries, two or three centuries of history; has seen his country, city, and family butchered, bargained with pirates and bureaucrats, eaten filth in order to stay alive” (214). Indeed, quick learning ability is essential for immigrants’ survival and success, but what is disturbing is that Mukherjee seems to have linked this ability with “an elite group of Asian” immigrants, such as Jasmine (with her inherent aristocracy) and Du, a sophisticated Saigon boy who treats the Hmong kids with contempt and “thinks of them as illiterate mountain people, peasants” (220).²¹ As Koshy observes, poor immigrants such as the Kanjobal women, the “Vadheras and the other Flushing Indians are bracketed outside this grouping” (149). I suggest that in her intention to represent immigrants’ resolute break with their heritage and fitting into the new culture, Mukherjee conveys the idea that immigrants of wealthy or aristocratic families, such as Jasmine and Du, are indeed superior and can do better in the United States than immigrants of lower-middle class.

In Mukherjee’s depiction, Jasmine completes a series of transformations and strives to make a desirable home with her agency and resourcefulness.²² Yet not only is Jasmine’s success different from the classic American success story, but her homemaking resists a mere mimicry of the mainstream American home and thus diverges from the traditional pattern of the female *buildungsroman* (because she aims at self-gratification in addition to cultural inclusion). In the novel of *buildungsroman*, female protagonists usually complete their maturation by a happy marriage. Jasmine’s story at first resembles

this pattern but eventually subverts it. She compares herself with Jane Eyre but is well aware of the difference between them, saying: "In Baden, I am Jane. Almost" (26). Like Jane, Jasmine's Mr. Rochester is Bud, paralyzed, but Jasmine and Bud are not married. The fact is Bud has proposed but Jasmine has never said yes.

I suggest that Jasmine performs the mainstream home pattern but refuses to be restricted by it. Rather, she appropriates the spirit that informs the American home to her advantage. We may look at how Mukherjee describes her protagonist's life with Bud in order to better understand the image of immigrant homemaking in *Jasmine*. Initially Jasmine is content to live with Bud, although she admits that she only has "affection" for him rather than the "headiness, dizziness, porousness" of passionate love she has felt for Prakash and Taylor (211). We can say that she has had the home of her dream, with a "most reliable, considerate" white man as husband and an adopted son, an indicator of the inclusiveness and love of the American family (157). Aside from this, Bud has given her security at a time when she is running away from her late husband's killer in New York. In Jasmine's terms, "Bud has kept me out of trouble. I don't want trouble" (211). However, the sense of happiness and safety vanishes with Bud's being shot and paralyzed. Gone with it also is an image of the ideal American home. Jasmine feels what still keeps her at Bud's side is only "duty and prudence" (211). Secretly she begins to pray, or wish, that Taylor can find her and take her away. She says, "I feel the tug of opposing forces. Hope and pain. Pain and hope" (21). The narrative indicates that Jasmine is biding her time to leave so that she refuses to give Bud a definite answer to his proposal, as she tells herself: "the old Bud, the pre-Harlan Bud, I might ... marry" (213).

While Jasmine is hesitating between “hope” and “pain,” her adopted son Du has actually arranged his own departure from this home. He claims that his leaving is due to Jasmine’s pregnancy: “He’s got his own kid coming. He never wanted me” (221). But Jasmine explains Du’s decision as follows:

Had things worked out differently – no Harlan Kroener, no droughts – Du would have had the father of any boy’s dream, a funny, generous, impulsive father, an American father from the heartland like the American lover I had for only a year. I would have had a husband, a place to call home.

This, I realize, is not it.

In the America Du knows, mothers are younger than sisters, mothers are illegal aliens, murderers, rape victims; in Du’s America, parents are unmarried, fathers are invalids, shot in the back on the eve of Christmas Eve. (224)

I suggest that both Jasmine and Du are Mukherjee’s successful immigrants who give first priority to their own survival and development. We should remember that Jasmine is not a woman who yields easily to tradition in any sense. She has overcome numerous difficulties in order to survive in both India and the United States, and has broken with her past and her heritage unhesitatingly for her own transformation. In addition, she cannot forget the lessons she has learned about the American home, especially about its flexibility and the priority of individualism. Du is also an immigrant who has undergone countless hardships in his diasporic journey and emphasizes personal striving for his survival. When it comes to homemaking in America, they naturally place themselves above all other considerations. From another perspective, we may call it their performance of the American spirit of individualism.

Therefore, for both Jasmine and Du, having a home with Bud signifies their own Americanization, especially when Bud is healthy and capable. But it seems that looking after the disabled Bud at the cost of their own freedom has not been included in their version of the American dream. The “good home” that Bud has provided them thus loses its glamour with the gloomy prospect of taking care of him for the rest of his life (209). When Jasmine asks herself: “how dare we want more?” (209), she is well aware that she is far from being content with such a home. She predicts that after Du’s departure she “will be lonely here, with Bud or without him” (223). Consequently, Jasmine and Du justify each other’s decision to abandon their Baden home with Bud. Jasmine understands Du’s longing for a perfect American home (as I mentioned in the last quote) and thinks that his leaving “was inevitable. Even healthy” (224). Du has seen Taylor’s postcard notifying his imminent arrival for Jasmine and tells her: “whatever you’re planning to do is okay. Just do it” (209).

In this way, Du and Jasmine eventually leave Bud and abandon the “desirable” home that the three of them have made together. Du leaves first for California to join his sister, while Jasmine waits impatiently for a few more months until her “rescuer” Taylor comes with Duff, and then she joins them in their journey to the west (210). When Jasmine finally leaves her Baden home, she is saying, “I am not choosing between men. I am caught between the promise of America and old-world dutifulness. A caregiver’s life is a good life. What am I to do? ... I am out of the door and in the potholed and rutted driveway, scrambling ahead of Taylor, greedy with wants and reckless from hope” (240-41).

Jasmine is indeed like a tornado, “leaving a path of destruction behind” her as she hastens to fit in and to make a desired home for herself in the United States (205). She is not only destroying memories and practices of Indian culture, but also severs any link with the Indian community in the new world. She does not care whom she may hurt in her hurried movement, both whites and Indians alike, but she does care to get what she wants. Therefore, “recklessness” is an appropriate word to describe her as an immigrant. Mukherjee has not provided a sense of closure to this narrative. At the end of the novel, Jasmine has abandoned all existing patterns of living and belonging and is facing an uncertain future. How she will carry on her relationship with Taylor remains unknown. But she makes sure to take her fate into her own hands and to “re-position the stars” (240). She says: “It isn’t guilt that I feel [about leaving Bud], it’s relief. I realize I have already stopped thinking of myself as Jane. Adventure, risk, transformation: the frontier is pushing indoors through uncaulked windows. Watch me re-position the stars” (240).

As Sandra Ponzanesi argues in *Paradoxes of Postcolonial Culture: Contemporary Women Writers of the Indian and Afro-Italian Diaspora* (2004), despite the multiculturalism of the United States, “Mukherjee assumes in her novel that there is only one way to be American: by asserting one’s own individuality and centering others around the self” (47). I would expand her argument and suggest that Mukherjee’s immigrant characters celebrate individualism also because it characterizes the flexibility of the American home. In *Jasmine*, immigrants’ homemaking is based on their individual needs, and so is the disintegration of their home. They aspire the American life style and home pattern and are determined to perform such a home at all costs, but they refuse to be confined by it. It seems that to Mukherjee’s immigrant characters, such as Jasmine and

Du, "the promise of America" does not require traditional values (such as duty, faithfulness and compassion) but only needs courage, quick-learning ability, and a vision that is always future-oriented and self-directed.

As is indicated in *Jasmine*, immigrants, especially immigrant women, can only succeed in their assimilation and self-fulfillment by breaking from the undesirable ancestral home and diasporic community, and by performing the desirable mainstream American home pattern and American values such as individualism. This narrative also suggests that agency and resourcefulness are the key to successful assimilation. Mukherjee's representation of immigrant transformation and homemaking is thus exciting but unconventional in its subversion of established narrative paradigms and social expectations of immigrants. Anupama Jain contends that *Jasmine* is "an exposure of the contradictions in the stories of America" (180). I would suggest that Mukherjee also exposes in this narrative the contradictions in the diasporic homemaking. It is in such subversion and exposure that Mukherjee's *Jasmine* attests to the complexity of America and makes us reconsider the different manners of immigrant homemaking in this multicultural society.

Endnotes

¹ Koshy, 139; Lim, "Immigration and Diaspora," 289-311 and Kristin Cater-Sanborn, 573-93.

² Ponzanesi, "The Exuberance of Immigration," *Paradoxes of Postcolonial Culture*, 35.

³ Since her first novel, *The Tiger's Daughter* published in 1971, Mukherjee has written two collections of short stories (*Darkness* and *The Middleman and Other Stories*), two works of nonfiction (*Days and Nights in Calcutta* and *The Sorrow and the Terror*), and seven novels (*The Tiger's Daughter*, *Wife*, *Jasmine*, *Holder of the World*, *Leave It to Me*, *Desirable Daughters* and *The Tree Bride*). Her most recent work, *The Tree Bride*, was published in 2004. Most of her works are about the immigration experience. As Huang notes, "Mukherjee's fictions are concerned with several prominent themes: the Indian diaspora, immigration, displacement, Americanization/ assimilation, adaptability, contrasts between and transition from the old world (Asia, specifically India) and the new world (specifically the United States)" (145).

⁴ Fakrul Alam categorizes Mukherjee's works into three phases in accordance with her immigration life (9-10). Her early works, *The Tiger's Daughter* and some parts of *Days and Nights in Calcutta*, constitute the first phase of her writing in which she tries to come to terms with her Indian heritage. Works such as *Wife*, *The Sorrow and the Terror* and the short stories in *Darkness* were written in the second phase when Mukherjee drew on her own Canadian experience. Although Mukherjee was a tenured professor in the country, she still experienced racism and found herself on the verge of becoming a

"housebound, fearful, aggrieved, obsessive, and unforgiving queen of bitterness" (quoted in Alam 10). According to Alam, the third phase of her writing encompasses works such as *Jasmine* and the short story collection *The Middle Man and Other Stories*, in which she describes Asian immigrants' active participation in American life and experiencing the melting pot of the United States. By this time Mukherjee had moved to the United States and most of her works at this stage draw on her own experience and reflect her ideas about the melting pot of the United States.

⁵ What Tara experiences in her home country resembles Mukherjee's own findings on her trip back to India with her husband in 1973. As Mukherjee recounts in her non-fiction *Days and Nights in Calcutta*, she was shocked at the poverty, social chaos and mistreatment of women: "What is unforgivable is the lives that have been sacrificed to notions of propriety and obedience" (*Days and Nights in Calcutta* 217).

⁶ Jain 141.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ponzanesi, 31-50.

⁹ Although Mukherjee insists that her characters are not representative, she still gives a seemingly representative account of India and the Indian home from the way she describes the rural and urban India under the joint influence of national events, tradition and customs, colonial history, and western culture.

¹⁰ For more information about Indian partition, see Thomas E. Hachey. *The Problem of Partition : Peril to World Peace*. Chicago: Rand McNally, 1972; Joya Chatterji. *The spoils of Partition: Bengal and India, 1947-1967*. Cambridge; New York : Cambridge UP, 2007.

¹¹ Kalpana Dasgupta. *Women on the Indian Scene: An Annotated Bibliography*. New Delhi: Abhinav Publications, 1976; Girija Khanna and Mariamma A. Varghese. *Indian Women Today*. New Delhi: Vikas, 1978; Chimnabai II, Maharani of Baroda and S.M. Mitra. *The Position of Women in Indian Life*. Delhi: Neeraj Pub. House; New Delhi: distributed by D.K. Publishers' Distributors, 1981. Stanley Wolpert. *India*. Berkeley: U of California P, 1991.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ For more information about Sikh independence movement, see Joyce J.M. Pettigrew, *The Sikhs of the Punjab: Unheard Voices of State and Guerrilla Violence*. London; Atlantic Highlands, N.J., USA: Zed Books, 1995.

¹⁴ Axel, 411-428.

¹⁵ Roy, "The Aesthetics of an (Un)willing Immigrant," 127-41 and Chiu, "Trauma and Multiplicity," 19-35..

¹⁶ Inderpal Grewal, Monica Chiu, Anindyo Roy and Susan Koshy have all discussed Mukherjee's blackening of Indian culture.

¹⁷ Maxine Hong Kingston, among other immigrant writers, depicts some negative aspects of Chinese culture in her influential memoir *The Woman Warrior* and contributed decisively to the debate in Chinese American literary circles about cultural authenticity in literary representation.

¹⁸ Mukherjee is criticized for depicting elite Asian immigrants. Ketu H. Katrak, Susan Koshy, Inderpal Grewal and Sandra Ponzanesi argue that Mukherjee ignores the significance of class and caste in this novel. In particular, they think that lower class

immigrants hardly have access to the opportunities granted to immigrants with aristocratic background, as represented by Jasmine.

¹⁹ Rao, "Bharati Mukherjee's *Jasmine*," 73-77.

²⁰ Koshy, "The Geography of Female Subjectivity," 149.

²¹ Jasmine's family had been rich in Lahore for centuries before the Indian partition. Like other Punjabi Hindus, Jasmine's parents had to flee to India during the Partition, leaving behind their possessions and a comfortable life in Lahore forever. However, even long after they had settled down in Hasnapur as poor farmers, Jasmine's father still keeps the manners of a Lahori landlord (42). We are told that Jasmine has inherited not only "his looks" but also his aristocratic spirit. Mukherjee seems to suggest here that class status matters. For the characters in this novel an upper or middle-class background sets them apart from the masses and also guarantees Jasmine the insight and potential to escape from the darkness of her home country.

²² Jasmine's series of name changes (Jyoti-Jasmine-Jase-Jane) before and after the diaspora are emblematic of her identity transformation. Joyti, which means "light" in her mother tongue, reflects the dark and suffocating Indian world in which she has lived. Jasmine, a name given by her husband Prakash, evokes the sweetness of liberation and the exotic quality of the Oriental woman. Jase and Jane, names given by her American benefactors, signal Jasmine's participation in American life and her cultural transformation. See Roy's "The Aesthetics of an (Un)willing Immigrant" for more details.

CHAPTER IV

WRITING AS DWELLING: MEENA ALEXANDER'S *FAULT LINES*

I ask myself, am I a creature with no home, no nation? And if so, what new genus could I possibly be?

It seems a poor thing to say, but the best I have learnt has to do with unlearning the fixed positioning I was taught, trusting my own nose, diving into the waves, tale telling.

– Meena Alexander, *The Shock of Arrival*

Unlike the homes depicted in narratives by Chuang Hua and Mukherjee, Meena Alexander has not described in her memoir *Fault Lines* (1993) her homemaking based on the cultural models offered by either her ancestral country or the host country. Instead, she is concerned with a home built in a different sphere, namely, a home “constructed” via writing and in writing. Alexander’s homemaking gesture is spiritual and political. In explaining the task of writing, Alexander states in an interview with Ruth Maxey that “the act of writing is intrinsic to the act of living” (188). She conjures up a sense of home in writing that she is lacking in real life; at the same time she uses her pen as a weapon to fight and actively seek home for some marginalized individuals such as women, immigrants and women writers of color (she herself is an epitome of all these three types of people). As she states in *The Shock of Arrival: Reflections on Postcolonial Experience* (1996), her “homemaking” is a strategy of self “positioning” (117). In particular, it has to do with her critiquing and “unlearning the fixed positioning [she] was taught” in her home country and receiving nations (117). Therefore, Alexander is another salient

example of home performers who use the home as a stage to perform individual (and group) identities. Unlike Chuang Hua who depicts immigrants performing the “authentic” ancestral home and culture heritage, and Mukherjee who represents immigrants endorsing western home model and values, Alexander is writing about immigrants who do not feel at home anywhere. Alexander performs the idea of home on the spiritual and political level by experimenting with the genre of autobiography. Such a homemaking strategy attests to the way in which Alexander, a writer and migrant, views the impact of diaspora on her subjectivity.

Born a Syrian Christian in north India, Alexander was raised in India and Sudan and got her Ph.D. in England. She returned to India at age twenty-two and worked as a college teacher for a couple of years before moving to New York City with her Jewish American husband. As Ngugi Wa Thiong’o introduces in the preface of *Fault Lines*, Alexander’s life is characterized by multiplicity:

Multiple religions – Christianity, Judaism, Buddhism, Hinduism – are part of her growing up. She dwells in multiple places she calls home, although quite often they are temporary abodes on her way to elsewhere, crossing borders of geography, culture, and language. India, Africa, Europe, and the United States are her home at different times, but they are also her places of exile which she longs for home. ... She dwells in many languages ... Malayalam, the language of her Kerala childhood [,] Arabic, the language of her home in Africa [,] French and English, the languages of colonial impositions...(xi-xii)

Because of such multiplicity in life, Alexander has developed her distinctive strategy of comprehending the world and constructing her “Nadu,” that is, homeland, by way of

writing. Different from Chuang Hua and Mukherjee who identify with either the ancestral country or the host country and represent their own or their fictional characters' performances of the ideal home accordingly, Alexander finds home in neither model due to the oppression or prejudice she has experienced in these countries. As a result, she prefers to "make" a home via writing and in writing. In other words, she performs the home for spiritual sustenance. To better convey the idea of a spiritual home, she also performs her literary medium: autobiographical writing. Therefore, Alexander is a performer on multiple levels for the purpose of homemaking. I would suggest that *Fault Lines* is Alexander's apologia for home performers like herself: a migrant woman writer of color. A discussion about Alexander's diasporic sensibility and identity politics will help us better appreciate her multi-faceted performances of the home in *Fault Lines*.

A Nowhere Creature: Alexander's Diasporic Sensibility

With the "multiplicity" in life (that I mentioned earlier in this chapter), Alexander is a salient example of migrants who have crossed numerous geographical and cultural borders. Many of them may find themselves unable to identify with any of the countries in which they have stayed or lived due to various historical, social, cultural, or personal reasons. They could be early immigrants such as the Africans in the Americas, or refugees and migrants in modern or contemporary times. Although they may finally settle down in one of the adopted countries, many of them lack the sense of belonging. At the same time, the native country has become a "place of no return" for most of them, physically and/or psychologically. Hence these individuals are aptly encapsulated by Alexander's description of herself in *Fault Lines* as: "a nowhere creature" (30). As

Alexander describes herself, "That's all I am, a woman cracked by multiple migrations. Uprooted so many times she can connect nothing with nothing" (2). In this respect, Alexander is somewhat different from Chuang Hua and her migrant characters who choose to identify with their ancestral culture.

Despite the representative nature of Alexander's migration on the whole, each of her trips is a unique personal experience and needs elaboration for a better understanding of the diasporic sensibility that she has thus acquired. To be specific, the migration in various countries provides Alexander a special opportunity to defamiliarize herself from all the nations and cultures in which she has situated herself and to sharpen her perception for a more detached and more realistic point of view. Consequently, Alexander is unable to identify with either her ancestral land or the numerous host countries. In *Fault Lines*, there are vignettes of her life in India, Sudan, England and the United States. The social and cultural circumstances in these countries have become the main cause of Alexander's sense of non-belonging.

India is where Alexander grew up and returned to yearly between ages five and seventeen for holidays, and where she worked as a college teacher in her twenties for a couple of years. She cherishes a deep love for the Indian landscape and writes passionately about her ancestral home in Kerala. The following delineation appears repeatedly in *Fault Lines* like a refrain:

When I think back through earlier childhood, the houses I lived in, the real, solid places I knew shine out for me, various, multiple, bound together by the landmass of India, an accustomed geography. The constancies of my life, the hands I held onto, the rooms or gardens I played in, ripple in memory, and

sometimes it is as if the forgotten earth returns. (53)

However, Alexander finds India oppressive for women and detrimental to women writers because the “disclosures that a writing life commits one to” are “quite contrary to the reticence that femininity requires” (113). Her attitude resembles Mukherjee’s. Like Mukherjee, this attitude accounts for Alexander’s disapproval of nostalgia, even though she feels displaced in the United States, especially in the first few years of her immigration. It also distinguishes Alexander from Chuang Hua and many other first-generation immigrants who attempt to hide in the self-isolating ethnic home and nostalgia when facing hostility and prejudice in their adopted countries. Admittedly, Alexander still maintains frequent contact with her family in India, has invited her mother to stay with her in the United States for a while (to help take care of her young children), and has returned a couple of times with her two children to her home country. But deep in her heart India is no longer “home” because she has married and moved out of the country. To be specific, India is merely a mother’s place that only welcomes married daughters back. In Indian culture, woman is a displaced creature in that she is destined to marry and move to where her husband and his family live and be affiliated to his family ever since. Now that she has moved with her American husband to the United States, her new home, Alexander can only return to India as a “guest.” Therefore, for Alexander and her extended family in India, she does not belong in the country any more, socially, legally and psychologically.

Compared with India, Sudan and England are only two stopping places in Alexander’s diasporic journey and thus far from being home for her. Khartoum, Sudan is merely where her father worked when she was between ages five and seventeen. She

attended school there and later graduated from Khartoum University. Yet she was illiterate in the Arab language and could not read the local newspaper which contained her first published poem translated by one of her friends. At school she only used English and French, two colonial languages. In other words, she did not belong to Khartoum. Alexander and her family chose to be Indian expatriates in this African country. As Alexander introduces in her memoir, each summer when the heat became unbearable in Khartoum, her mother would take her and her sisters and flee to India for about half a year, claiming that they were not made to live in that terrible place. If her father could not join their trip due to his job obligations, he would be left alone in the African heat. Since Alexander and her family had not thought of settling down in Khartoum, they never had a sense of home there. As a result, when the political situations deteriorated in Sudan due to the repressive regime of the new government (133), Alexander and her family left the country unhesitatingly. Her family returned to India, while she continued her diasporic journey alone: going to England for graduate studies.

Alexander's stay in England was much shorter: she stayed in Nottingham University for only four years. There are not detailed descriptions in *Fault Lines* about her life as a migrant in England. Instead, Alexander only quotes her father's remarks about British people's aloofness towards Indians and their feeling of racial superiority to the latter. As she recalls, "My father's fascination with the British, with their sense of order, but also his distance from it, his awareness of the sense of racial superiority that underlay their claims to Indian territory, came back to me" (154). Alexander then describes her father's voyage to Britain as a student (a few decades earlier than her own trip), which he considered difficult for Indian students because "they [the British] never

mixed with us" (154). Alexander has not explained why she skips the details about her own life there, but she does summarize very briefly what she felt as an international student in England: anxiety and terror. She felt anxious because she found "the future was not really comprehensible" (140). She also mentions her "terror" during this period regarding her loss of identity, that is, she realized that she had no history there and explained that "It was precisely to discover, to make up my history, that I had to return to India" (140). Apart from the above two statements, Alexander has not provided any other explanations. It seems certain that she felt displaced in England. We may assume that compared with her father's trip to England, Alexander most likely found that immigrants' lives were not greatly improved, or even remained as bad as ever, a few decades later when she was studying there. Therefore, her father's negative comments on Britain may serve as her own indirect critique of this colonial country. Definitely unable to settle down and make a home in Britain, Alexander returned to her homeland with a Ph.D. in Romantic literature, hoping that she would find her own place back in India.

Yet Alexander failed to find the expected sense of belonging and fulfillment in her home country upon her arrival in India in 1973. As a writer and scholar, Alexander found India during this period lacking the atmosphere and freedom for artistic creation and intellectual development. That were the years of the Emergency in India, when Prime Minister Indira Gandhi "withdrew civil liberties and people could be jailed on mere suspicion of an oppositional stance" (127). There was also press censorship. As a result, Alexander's poem entitled "Prison Bars," condemning the harsh treatment of prisoners, was accepted but never got published. Although she felt happy for having made some good friends during this period, she described her stay in India, together with her years in

England, as a “Long Fall,” as is so entitled for the chapter in her memoir (133-155). Such a “fall” is a loss of identity and of the sense of belonging even though she was physically present in her home country. Alexander was compelled to leave her homeland in order to find a place where she could feel settled and write freely. Hence she explains her departure from India in the following way:

Why did I leave India? ... All I knew was that something had broken loose from inside me, was all molten. And what was molten and broken loose had to do with India as I saw the land, and to write I had to flee into a colder climate. Else I would burn up and all my words with me. (146)

Alexander’s subsequent immigration to the United States in 1979, however, did not completely eliminate her feeling of non-belonging or give her a home to her heart’s content. She constantly puzzled over her identity: “Where was the life I had led? Who was I?” (147). Alexander also thought about Asian Indians as a collective in the United States, especially after she had learned from her preschool-age daughter that teachers and students at school confused native Americans with Asian Indians. She realized that in America she had to constantly explain herself and to “confess” whenever being asked questions such as “Who are you? Where are you from? What do you do?” (193). Her sense of displacement this time has to do with her status as a new immigrant and a member of a minority group in American society.

Upon her arrival in America, Alexander felt dislocated in this western country quite different from India. She experienced a culture shock and was “chilled by this strange new world: baby food in jars and shopping malls and at home books stacked high in piles with no time to read them” (147). Constantly comparing New York with Hyderabad, the

last Indian city in which she had lived, Alexander came to the realization that “My own soul seemed to me, then, a cabbagelike thing, closed tight in a plastic cover. My two worlds, present and past, were torn apart, and I was the fault line, the crack that marked the dislocation” (15).

In *Fault Lines* Alexander describes a Canadian girl, Chloe, who had suffered from culture shock and dislocation due to traveling. She met Chloe in Khartoum, Sudan when Alexander was still in her teens living with her parents. Newly wed to an Indian, Chloe went to Sudan with her husband to visit his sister. But she was stunned by the exotic Indian food and doubted the sanitation of drinking water there. As a result, Chloe shut herself in her hotel room, refusing to drink anything that hadn't been boiled three times and only eating food “that resembled the mash that is fed to babies” (101). She was also haunted increasingly by nightmares about scary Indian men attempting to force feed her Indian food. Having no way out, Chloe's Indian husband hurriedly took her back to Canada where her “disease” was instantly cured once she was restored to her Canadian home.

Chloe is an extreme case of people (such as tourists and immigrants) who have experienced culture shock. For most travelers, such shocking awareness is temporary and will be alleviated or overcome in time, as is the case with Alexander. However, Alexander finds herself unable to recover from another shocking awareness, that is, she could find no relief of the uncomfortable awareness as a member of the minority group (in her case, as a South Asian immigrant) who experienced prejudice in the late 1970s United States. She felt that she “stuck out like a sore black thumb, a grotesque thing” in the midst of white Americans (168), even when she was accompanied by her Jewish

husband. She was “shaken to the core” by the racist slurs she met with in the street of Minneapolis and could not understand where that white man’s fury came from (169). Even in her own home, Alexander is made aware of the difference of skin color among her family members when her four-year-old daughter naively blurts out: “You are brown mama, papa is blond papa, Adam is brown Adam, and I am peach Svati”(170). Alexander feels racial and ethnic borders in her life. She writes that in America “the barbed wire is taken into the heart” and yearns for “a world where the head is held high in sunlight” (195). She therefore summarizes her cultural identity in this way: “Ethnicity for such as I am comes into being as a pressure” (202).

Undoubtedly Alexander’s dislocation could not be “cured,” as Chloe’s was, by returning to her home country or to other places she had lived. Settling down at last in Manhattan, New York, Alexander ruminated on the layers of her past and the numerous borders she had crossed. She said to herself: “In Manhattan, I am a fissured thing, a body crossed by fault lines. Where is my past? What is my past to me, here, now at the edge of Broadway?” (182). But she was unable to find a place that could be called her real home and was “haunted by a homeland [she] will never find” (27). Alexander turns to writing to “build up” a home of a different kind for her “wandering” spirit. As she says, “I have tuned my lines to a different aesthetic, one that I build up out of all the stuff around me, improvising as I go along” (27). Therefore, a performed home with writing and in writing seems Alexander’s only viable spiritual dwelling place.

Identity Politics in Alexander’s Writing

Alexander’s diasporic sensibility determines the identity politics she has adopted in her writing. In other words, Alexander is conscious of her multiple status as a migrant, a

woman, and a woman writer of color. Aiming to claim a home place for these groups of people, Alexander's literary products delineate some important themes, such as cultural resistance and the political implication of writing, that are often taken up by diasporic writers and scholars. In Butler's terms, Alexander is consciously performing her multiple identities in writing.

As Wendy Walters argues in the introduction to *At Home in Diaspora: Black International Writing* (2005), "the articulation of diaspora identity in writing is more than a literary performance; it is, in fact, a political act" (ix). Similarly, Lisa Lowe and David Lloyd urge readers, in the introduction to *Politics of Culture in the Shadow of Capital* (1997), to "reconceive culture as a key site for political contestation, as the expression of resistance to exploitation" (3). Lowe and Lloyd are referring here to minority cultures' resistance to the dominant culture in the West. Such cultural resistance has become an established paradigm in Asian American literature, and in many cases it borders on or leads to nationalistic claims, especially at the beginning stage of Asian American literature.¹

I would suggest that Alexander's articulation of her identity politics encompasses but goes beyond this paradigm. Her writing is political on many levels, with cultural, social and gender concerns, targeting not only the adopted country, but also her home country. This approach distinguishes Alexander from Chuang Hua and many other immigrant writers who follow (or initially followed) the established nationalistic pattern, but likens her to Mukherjee in expanding and subverting a single literary model. Some black migrant writers, whom Walters discusses in *At Home in Diaspora*, have also critiqued both the home culture and the host culture. Therefore, Chuang Hua, Alexander,

Mukherjee and these black writers attest to the diversity and development in immigrant writing and constitute the multi-layered political voices in this field. In Alexander's case, she utters her voice on these issues from her own vantage point, namely as a diasporic woman writer of color, to claim a space of home for herself. These concerns inform her works of different genres, that is, in her poetry, fiction, memoir and essays, and are tied together with the central theme of defining and desiring a space of home.

Admittedly, not all diasporic writings are political. Take an example, Jane Snow Wong's *Fifth Chinese Daughter* (1945), Lin Yutang's *Chinatown Family* (1948) and Anzia Yezierska's *Bread Givers* (1925) are all apolitical. Political claim is not a major concern in these early immigrant narratives. However, we may say that a great number of diasporic works have important political implications, among them is Alexander's writing. By exploring how Alexander articulates these political concerns in her works, we can have a better understanding of the immense body of diasporic literary production, specifically in relation to the political stance of performing the home in diaspora via writing and in writing.

To begin with, Alexander is writing to claim a space for postcolonial individuals both in their ancestral culture and as immigrants, in her case, as an Indian and Indian migrant. Although both Alexander and Mukherjee are from India, Britain's former colony, Alexander's representation of colonialism is quite different from Mukherjee's. Instead of celebrating wholeheartedly the liberating impact of colonialism, as Mukherjee's protagonist in *Jasmine* does about the significance of learning English, Alexander's attitude toward colonialism is complex. On the one hand, she advocates its condemnation, especially in relation to its brutal dominance over Indian and other

indigenous cultures. In *The Shock of Arrival*, Alexander describes how the colonial language, English, was forced upon people in Britain's former colonies. According to Alexander, Sarojini Naidu, a famous Indian woman nationalist and poet, was forced by her father to learn the English language at age nine by being locked up alone in a room (175). Aside from its linguistic "imprisonment," Alexander also feels "psychically imprisoned" by the English language (*Shock of Arrival* 175). As she says, "It was as if a white skin had covered over that language of accomplishment and I had to piece through it, tear it open in order to make it supple, fluid enough to accommodate the murmurings of my own heart" (*Shock of Arrival* 4). To show her resolution against British colonialism, Alexander changed her anglicized name "Mary Elizabeth," which she had been baptized, to "Meena" at age fifteen when she was studying in Khartoum University. She ignored her father's dismay at her decision and his insistence on using "Mary Elizabeth" in her passport as long as she "lived under his protection" (*Shock of Arrival* 74). For Alexander, "Meena" expresses "some truer self, stripped free of the colonial burden... It is also the home name my parents had chosen for me at birth. It is the name under which I wished to appear" (*Shock of Arrival* 74), that is, to appear as an Indian woman rather than as a British subject. On the other hand, Alexander prefers to, or has to, write in English, her second language, because it is what she is most proficient in due to her postcolonial education. Such an attitude towards the colonial linguistic legacy reflects the love-hate attitude of many postcolonial people towards the former colonizing nation. From a different perspective, these people can make use of the colonial legacy to their own benefit. For Sarojini Naidu, she used the English language she had been forced to learn to advocate the downfall of British rule in India. For Alexander, she is able to reach

a larger audience by writing in English and stands a better chance of having her political voice heard. Thus she believes “there is a greater sense of liberation” in writing in English and cautions that “the joints between personal experience and cultural narrative need to be examined very closely” (Bahri 47).

Furthermore, Alexander’s individual voice also merges with immigrants’ collective voice. As we understand, postcolonial individuals’ immigration to the West does not necessarily guarantee them a better chance in life and a new home in the receiving countries. Alexander is articulating these immigrants’ concerns, her included, and seeking a home for them. She does so by telling immigration stories in her fiction and by advocating inter-ethnic alliances in her essays. Alexander has depicted different Indian immigrant figures in her writing. Sandhya, the protagonist of her fiction *Manhattan Music* (1997), is a displaced character. Born and having grown up in India, Sandhya had not left the country until her immigration to the United States with her Jewish husband. Her first few years in America as a housewife and new mother have been smooth. But as her daughter grows up and is sent to the daycare, Sandhya finds herself with more free time at hand and feeling increasingly empty. She has no idea about how to adjust to the life in this new country. Also, she feels helpless when facing racist attacks. Her white husband cannot offer any constructive help in her cultural adaptation. Sandhya tries to fill her emptiness by romance but eventually is abandoned by her lover. All this leads to her attempted suicide. Eventually, with the help of her friends, Sandhya realizes that she must rely on herself and learn how to survive in this not very friendly new culture.

If Sandhya is the displaced immigrant whose problems Alexander aims to expose and caution readers against, there are other more successful Indian characters in

Manhattan Music who can serve as Sandhya's role models and become Alexander's recommended immigrant figures. Among them are Sandhya's cousin Jay (a well-known photographer in India who turns to writing after immigrating to the United States), her cousin Sakhi (who is active among Indian immigrants and helps Sandhya recover after the latter's attempted suicide), and American-born Indian actress and Sandhya's friend, Daupadi. What these characters have in common is their perseverance and an active attitude towards life – no matter how hard life may be, they just struggle forward and fight it out. Thus I suggest that in delineating these tough Indian characters in contrast to the weak character of Sandhya, Alexander is demonstrating what immigrants can do in the West to survive, to be happy and claim a home space for themselves.

Inter-ethnic alliance is another strategy that Alexander has adopted and advocated to help resolve immigrants' problems. She understands that minority groups in multi-ethnic western countries, not only those from postcolonial countries, may face similar identity problems at some point in their lives. Accordingly, she thinks that identity politics "gains in power to the extent that it is anchored with multiple lines to a common, if shifting, social reality" (*Shock of Arrival* 69). In her case, she is concerned with Asian immigrants' experience of "being named as Other" in the United States (*Shock of Arrival* 69). That is why she is "constantly making alliances" with other Asian Americans and learns from them and "African Americans, Native Americans, Hispanic Americans, Jewish Americans, Arab Americans" (*Shock of Arrival*, 128). She went to see the exhibit by Asian American artists and was struck by their "rich, aesthetic resistance ... born out of dislocation" (*Shock of Arrival* 152). Alexander reiterates that the goal of writing and other forms of art is to help interpret immigrant life, clarify "the painful gap between

desire and the brutal actual” and “might also change” such reality (*Shock of Arrival* 159). By learning from and/or working together with people of other minority groups, Alexander aims to better express immigrants’ desires and needs and help them find viable means of homemaking in the West.

In addition to addressing immigrants’ concerns, Alexander also employs a gender politics in her writing. She points out that in India the “strictures of colonialism and patriarchy fuse...with a sense of the need to keep women in their place, teach them what to do” (*Shock of Arrival* 82). As a feminist, she makes it her goal to give voice to herself and other Indian women against the oppressive patriarchal and colonial power. Included in her goal is also a need to seek a niche for women writers in the canon both in India and in the West. Alexander argues that the experience of fighting against patriarchy and sexism in India and other patriarchal cultures may help immigrant women in fighting against racism and prejudice in the West, for these two kinds of oppression resemble each other in their unjust nature. As she contends in “Translating Violence” in *The Shock of Arrival*:

If to be female is already to be Other to the dominant languages of the world, to the canonical rigor of the great classical literatures of Arabic or Sanskrit or Tamil, To be female and face conditions of violent upheaval – whether in an actual war zone or in communal riots – is to force the fragmentation both of the dominant, patriarchal mold and of the marginality of female existence. Indeed, such fragmentation can work powerfully into the knowledge necessary for a diasporic life, for the struggle for a multicultural existence in North America. Indian women’s advocacy groups, such as Sakhi in

New York and Manavi in New Jersey, are working quite precisely against both the inherited patriarchal mold and the pressures of racism in the new world.

(83)

In writing as a woman and for women, Alexander takes women as her primary concern in her works. She chooses women protagonists for her novels about diaspora. In doing so she shows concern with how women deal with their identity problems in immigration. As she has indicated in the passage cited above, it is not that men do not have identity crises or problems, but due to the oppression of women in their home country and heritage culture, women's demand for social justice doubles that of men's after immigration: women have to fight against both the "inherited" patriarchy in the immigrant community and "the racism in the new world" (*Shock of Arrival* 83). To make things worse, as she points out, woman is often complicit with the dominant power in her own suppression and thus becomes a "prisoner of her sex" (*Shock of Arrival* 67). When describing her family history in *Fault Lines*, for example, Alexander is trying to think back through female figures, namely through her mother and grandmother, to see what she can learn or get from them. In particular, she reflects on how her maternal grandmother Elizabeth fought for women's emancipation before and after India's independence and how in contrast her own mother, namely Elizabeth's daughter, has chosen to live a life as a traditional woman. By depicting how women were disparaged and confined in Indian culture and how they have fought for their right, Alexander is evoking social justice and claiming a place for women in history and in the literary canon.

Admittedly, there are themes other than the political concerns in Alexander's works: the immigrant's cultural baggage, the function of memory and of language, to name a few. However, these themes are subservient to her loud political voice in all her works, serving for her postcolonial, immigrant and feminist claims. In discussing the role of language, for instance, Alexander attacks the oppressive power of colonialism in terms of linguistic dominance but also shows how postcolonial people make use of the colonizer's language for its downfall and for their own benefit. Furthermore, for Alexander, it is the past that defines one's identity; in western countries whose history excludes new immigrants, the new comers should not forget their past and their original cultures. She claims in *The Shock of Arrival* that "In order to belong you need a past" (126). However, she does not endorse nostalgia. She advocates a strategic use of the past, which distinguishes her from both Chuang Hua (with her nostalgic approach) and Mukherjee (who insists on breaking with the past). Alexander believes that the goal of her writing is to "make a durable past in art, a past that is not merely nostalgic, but stands in vibrant relation to the present" (*Shock of Arrival* 127).

Alexander's attitudes towards these issues, therefore, inform her identity politics as an immigrant, a woman and a writer of color, and are political on all these levels. However, it does not follow that her works are mere political treatises. As an experienced writer, Alexander is a master of words and literary devices. A striking feature of performativity informs her literary production, especially in her memoir *Fault Lines*. Such a performative feature is closely related to her goal of diasporic homemaking and manifests itself in her experimenting with the genre of autobiography and performing the diasporic home in *Fault Lines*.

Performing the Diasporic Home in *Fault Lines*

For some displaced immigrants who cannot or do not want to return to their ancestral countries but hope to find some channels of articulation and means to “anchor” their heart, certain forms of art (such as writing, painting and music) can be their viable options. In Alexander’s case, writing has become her means of self-expression as well as her spiritual dwelling place. It is in writing as an Asian American woman that Alexander finds a sense of wholeness.

In explaining the task of writing, Alexander states in an interview with Ruth Maxey that “the act of writing is intrinsic to the act of living” (188). She specifies it by saying that “the task of poetry is to reconcile us to the world – not to accept it at face value or to assent to things that are wrong, but to reconcile one in a larger sense,” “...to allow us a measure of tenderness and grace with which to exist” (188). The “larger sense” and “tenderness and grace” that Alexander has in mind about poetry, and in extension about writing on the whole, can be interpreted as her ultimate goal of writing: writing for social justice and human dignity. I suggest that this goal, political indeed, manifests itself in her writing on two levels: writing in search of home and writing to make a home.

Considering Alexander’s migrant experience and dislocation in a number of countries, these two levels are interrelated. To be more specific, she is writing, on the one hand, to claim a place in history and in the canon for herself and many other displaced individuals. In her own words, she is “writing in search of home” (3). On the other hand, Alexander is also writing to make a home, a spiritual inhabitancy for her displaced self. These two

aspects are represented in different genres of her works, but are especially well articulated in her memoir *Fault Lines*.

Alexander calls herself “fault lines,” along which so many layers of experiences and concerns are revealed and clash with one another. Therefore, we can expect that *Fault Lines*, a record of Alexander’s memories, feelings and emotions, is marked by complexity. However, a close reading of *Fault Lines* shows that this complex memoir is informed by a deliberate performative stance. Unlike Chuang Hua and Mukherjee, who depict immigrant characters performing diasporic homes in real life, Alexander writes about herself performing a spiritual home in writing. Such a stance is not simply a postmodern writer’s play with words, but rather a political strategy Alexander adopts to articulate her diasporic identity and homemaking desire. This posture determines the way in which she experiments with the form of memoir and constructs the image of home in writing. In other words, the form of memoir provides an apt political stage for Alexander to perform the diasporic home via writing and in writing.

Writing Oneself into Being, or Searching for a Home in Writing

As Alexander describes in *Fault Lines*, a childhood conversation prompted her to become a writer. When she was five and a half and newly arrived in Sudan with her parents, the uncle of her playmate Haadia, a Sudanese poet named Abdullah Tayib, urged her to learn the syllables of Arabic. The poet asks her, “Unless you learn, who will speak your name? How will you know yourself?...How will you write, child, how will you read? Who will know your name?” (182). As Alexander recalls many years later in America, the Sudanese poet’s remarks contributed to her later passion for writing: “it is

the pain of no one knowing my name that drives me to write. That, and the sense that I am living in a place where I have no history” (182). She is speaking here on both personal and collective levels, referring to herself as an Indian woman and a woman writer of color. With multiple sensibilities, Alexander writes to claim a home place in history and/or in the canon for some marginalized individuals (such as Indian women, immigrants, and writers of color). Such a goal determines that *Fault Lines* has become a performed stage for her political agenda. In this performed memoir in search of home, Alexander both identifies with other women forerunners and justifies her own struggle for social justice.

First of all, Alexander makes it clear that she is writing as an Indian woman and with an aim to claim a place for Indian women and women writers in Indian history and in the canon. With such acknowledgement, Alexander critiques how Indian culture has suppressed women and women writers. Therefore like many women writers, her narrative voice becomes a plural “I” time and again. In *Fault Lines*, Alexander explains that because a writing life commits one to disclosures, it is “quite contrary to the reticence that femininity requires” in India (113). It is no wonder when she began to write poetry at about ten and eleven, her mother became anxious. Such anxiety is justified by, or reflects the internalization of, traditional Indian views about women writing. As a result, Alexander used to hide out to write when she was in Khartoum:

either behind the house where there was a patch of bare wall and the shade of a neem tree, or better still, in the half-darkness of the toilet.... Gradually, this enforced privacy – for I absorbed, perhaps even in part identified, with amma’s disapproval of my poetic efforts – added an aura of something illicit, shameful,

to my early sense of scribblings... Schoolwork was seen in a totally different light... The other writing, in one's own present, was to be tucked away, hidden.

I had to be secretive about the writing that came out of my own body, but still a fierce pride clung to it. (113-14)

Many years later, even in the 1990s, her mother still asserted that women wrote because they had nothing better to do: "It's like hanging your dirty laundry outside the house for all to see. Nothing more than that" (264). A quick look at some of the chapter titles in the memoir will give us some ideas of what traditional Indians such as Alexander's mother would be displeased with: "Kerala Childhood," "Crossing Borders," "Stone-Eating Girl," "Khartoum Journal," "Language and Shame," "Long Fall," "Seasons of Birth," "Dictionary of Desire"... Topics such as emotion, desire, shame, birth and family secrets are supposed to fall under the "unspeakable" for traditional Indian women. The act of exposing such things in a "non-feminine" method, namely by means of the "confessional" memoir, is a serious offense to the code of Indian femininity. Alexander is well aware of such a "transgression" and seems quite proud of her own defiance when she introduced the content of *Fault Lines* to her friend Roshni on the phone: "'living without fixed ground rules, moving about so much; giving birth, all that stuff,' I replied shamelessly and laughed into the telephone" (4).

That is exactly what Alexander wants to do with her writing: to expose the unspeakable oppression against women in India and justify their needs and desires. While Mukherjee describes in her fiction Indian women fleeing from the country to avoid such social "fate," Alexander exposes the social ills and calls people to take action. She articulates her disapproval of the marriage custom in India and suppression of women's

desires. The old Indian custom of arranged marriages is the first practice that Alexander attacks. According to Alexander, arranged marriage has become a patriarchal practice mainly with consideration for the continuation of a family lineage and reproduction, and for the accumulation of wealth. For one thing, the young man and woman who are to be matched by their elders are seldom consulted or permitted enough opportunities to meet and know each other before their marriage. For another, the dowry practice is considered to be “a terrible sin” because of “all this craze for money that’s sweeping ordinary lives. People want a fridge from here, a scooter from there, chiffon saris from the other place” (209).

Associated with the “evil” of arranged marriages in India is the punishment and tragedy befallen of women who refuse or fail to meet the requirements of this traditional custom. One practice is the spate of bride burnings, that is, women “were being burnt to death when their families of origin could not meet the demands for extra dowry. An exploding stove here, a burst can of kerosene there, matches that mysteriously caught flame when held to a dupatta or sari pallu” (209). Or as Alexander introduces in the memoir, in her parents’ times (that is, a few decades earlier) women jumped (or were pushed, as she suspects) into wells for failure to meet the marriage requirements.

As Alexander critiques in *Fault Lines*, another deep-rooted idea against women in India is the disapproval of women remaining single for long once they have reached a marriageable age. Again women’s prolonged single status is considered a disgrace to their families and these women might end up dead mysteriously only because of this. Alexander explains in the memoir:

After all, once a few months had passed while a marriageable young woman

loitered between kitchen, drawing room, and the well side, anything might happen. Especially if she bound jasmine blossoms in her hair, or dried out her silks all alone by the hibiscus grove, fires might start crackling, tongues would wag, and not even the good lord could prevent the consequences. Nothing but shame could ensue, household shame, female madness, death. (224)

Alexander recalls the hard time she had living as a single woman in Hyderabad when she was in her twenties and she felt that “marriage ... might stitch me back into the shared world” (210). When her two younger sisters refused arranged marriages and preferred to remain single in their early thirties and twenties respectively, Alexander understood why they hid themselves from the visiting relatives who held conservative views. That was the gossip of being considered “odd” and “some sort of aberration” for not having married that they wanted to avoid (223). As Alexander comments, “it was a feeling I was familiar with, having felt that hot pang when, still unmarried, I had returned home many years ago to suffer under the gaze of gathered relatives” (223). Thus to the dismay of Alexander and numerous Indian women, marriage cannot simply be expected as the happiest moment in their lives, but rather is “the stumbling block, the high threshold stone over which a woman might enter. And she would either walk or fall, bruising herself cruelly” (223).

According to Alexander, the traditional (arranged) marriage is a regression and a hindrance to Indian women. Regardless of their educational background, whether with a high school certificate or a master’s degree, these women usually stay at home and take care of the family after marriage. All their formal education is wasted in such a way except the fact that it may have been helpful for them in finding good husbands and

possibly will be useful for children's education in the future. In contrast, feminine skills are considered more useful for Indian women. As Alexander states, "they had to let fall all their accomplishments, other than those that suited a life of gentility: some cooking, a little musical training, a little embroidery, enough skills of computation to run a household" (102). Thus she recalls that when she was little, "amma had tried again and again to show me how to stitch properly" (125). Now being far away from India, she certainly draws a line at it: "But I was much older now, and I felt I was living in a world where amma's kind of stitching did not make sense" (125). However, in the journals she kept as a teenager in Khartoum Alexander expressed the misery she went through in questions like "If you want me to live as a woman, why educate me?" "Why not kill me if you want to dictate my life?" (102). Although these questions were directed at her mother and at the traditional way she had been educated at home, Alexander is citing her personal experience to articulate her concern for all Indian women. She is performing her teenage self as an inquisitor of Indian customs and women's education. Her autobiographical voice here has become plural.

Another aspect of Indian tradition Alexander has attacked is its suppression of women's desires. Traditional female education discourages female's active pursuit of love and expression of sexual desires. According to such teaching, women should always be passive and be the object of men's desire. What is more, sexuality is linked directly to shame and death if women dare to have love affairs and bear babies out of wedlock. And women are taught to bear the blame themselves and thus they "took it upon themselves to do away with their own shameful bodies" (106). There have been countless stories about women jumping into wells after they were found pregnant. The young Alexander

happened to see tragic happening. As a result, the image of women jumping into wells was constantly with her during her childhood. She thus concludes in the memoir: "Sex and death were spliced and fitted into each other, quite precisely ... And shame lit the image. It was what women had to feel. Part of being, not doing" (110).

Although Alexander considers herself rebellious, she recalls how deeply such traditional female education had affected or confined her when she just reached adulthood and experienced the feeling of being in love. To make things worse, the academic discourse she had chosen to study, namely Romanticism, not only was not in the least helpful to her but "was predicated on the erasure" of the female self (141-42). Alexander recalls that when she was nineteen and studying in England, she was shocked to find that she "wanted a man" (139). She could not give herself to the man she loved, nor could she turn away. According to Alexander, "the intensity of sexual passion forced me back into my bodily self, made me turn against the 'reason' of the world" (139). She was "tormented by a sense of having transgressed a boundary, a code, an edict – something in the law as it stood" (139-40). As she acknowledges, "somehow, in my mind's eye, the crossing of borders is bound up with the loss of substances, with the distinct pain of substantial loss: with the body that is bound over into death, with the body that splits open to give birth"(140). When sexual passion threatened to let loose all the emotions Alexander was struggling hard to hold back, it became an "extreme danger" and finally caused her "nervous breakdown" (141). Such a result itself is a questioning and critique of the cultural code that has rendered her so.

If Alexander's recovery from the "nervous breakdown" is a tentative first step she had taken to move away from the tradition and toward female independence and

emancipation, her marriage with David, an American she had chosen herself, is a reward for her struggle in this direction. However, the success has been a hard win. At first, the couple had met with outright refusal to their marriage request from a clerk in an Indian courthouse. Alexander was thrown questions such as whether her father and grandfather knew about her marriage decision and whether she had got permission from them. Her “No”s to these questions were met with the same “No” from the clerk. Although the intervention of a lawyer eventually got the couple their common right to marry, the initial reaction of Alexander’s parents to her marriage was cold. As Alexander recalls, “Appa and amma were in Delhi at the time and wanted nothing to do with the whole business” (211). Although her parents provided a belated grand reception three weeks later for the newlyweds, the wedding day itself had been very hard for Alexander. She writes: “the memory of a small improvised marriage in the Hyderabad courthouse, no family present, just three friends as witnesses and the countless faces staring in through the barred windows at the blonde foreigner I was marrying, still worked a bitterness in my mouth” (210-11). Fighting against tradition requires courage and persistence, but it is also a tiring experience. Reflecting on these past events, Alexander expresses her hope: “I felt I needed the peace of a place where there was no more marrying, no more taking in marriage” (226).

But Alexander is not alone in her rebellion against tradition. Alexander contemplates the history of Indian women’s struggle for their emancipation and empowerment, believing that she is from “a long line of well-jumped women” (107). She regards her maternal grandmother Kunju as one of her role models, whom she has never met because Kunju died long before Alexander’s birth. Alexander imagines her

grandmother: “a sensitive, cultured woman; a woman who had a tradition, and a history... ; a woman who had lived to witness the birth pangs of a nation” (15). As we learn from the memoir, Kunju had a master’s degree and worked as the National Secretary for the Young Women’s Christian Association and traveled all over the world in her work for the organization. She was active in the nationalist movement in the early decades of the twentieth century and worked for “women’s education, for children’s education, for famine and flood relief” (12). As for her personal life, Kunju refused to be considered for an arranged marriage and eventually married relatively late in her life to a man of her own choice, namely Alexander’s grandfather Ilya, a Nationalist and a follower of Mahatma Gandhi.

In *Fault Lines*, Alexander defends her grandmother Kunju, a well-known rebellious woman in Indian history. According to Alexander, an old Indian belief has it that women failing to follow tradition will be punished by having no male offspring. It seems true if we consider the fact that Kunju “had never borne male offspring” (208). However, Alexander argues in the memoir that this pity or “imperfection” has nothing to do with her grandmother’s way of life or her nationalist work because “then her daughter [that is Alexander’s mother], who had led a life sanctioned by culture and ceremony, agreeing to a man of her father’s choice, at the right time, in the right place, she too had lacked male offspring” (208).

In introducing Kunju and valorizing her, Alexander is not merely writing to remember her grandmother, she also wants to gain power from such an ancestral figure, to back herself up in her striving for social justice. She wants to make history for herself as well, so to speak. Alexander has seen many other “well-jumped” Indian women like

her grandmother whom she can learn from: “women riding elephants, women like Princess Chitrangada with swords at their hips, bodies covered in rough jute, ...women, saris swept up shamelessly, high above the ankles, high above the knees” (107).

As an Indian woman writer with the determination to challenge the canon, Alexander is looking for forerunners for inspiration, spiritual support and a hope to claim a collective space for them in the canon. She has found what she wants from an early Indian woman autobiographer named Rassundara Devi. As she says,

I take courage from Rassundara Devi, who in 1876 published the first autobiography in Bengali, *Amar Jiban* (My Life). As a married woman, held within the confines of domesticity, she taught herself to read and write in secret, hiding a page from the Chaitanya Bhagavatha in the kitchen and scratching out the letters on the sooty wall. It took me many years to get where she got, many years to find my own sooty wall on which to scratch these alphabets. (142)

Thus by accounts of her own experience and the experiences of her forerunners, specifically rebellious Indian women, Alexander finds a conduit to combine the personal with the collective. In doing so, she turns her memoir into a critique of the tradition and a claim for justice and space for Indian women and women writers. At the same time, she has also achieved the goal of writing herself into being, or seeking a home space for herself in history and in the canon.

Alexander also articulates her feminist concern on behalf of immigrant women writers. To put it differently, she is writing also to seek a home for immigrant women writers. She is conscious of her own status as a woman writer of color in the West, which

has placed her in the same boat as many ethnic individuals who have been subjected to racism and prejudice in many western countries. Again we hear the plural narrative voice in the memoir and see her political claim for a niche in the canon for these immigrant writers, especially for ethnic women writers.

While studying in England, Alexander realized that as an immigrant she was excluded from the history of this colonial country. Like numerous immigrants from around the world, she did not have a sense of belonging there. When it comes to the literary canon, Alexander states in her interview with Maxey that

aspects of what are called or thought of as “canonical literature” are not available to you [i.e., a woman poet].

That’s a painful knowledge, which is why I wrote my book *Women in Romanticism*, because although there are women poets who are enshrined in the canon in India, or ... within English poetry of a certain era, certainly, the burden of knowledge has gone the other way. Implicitly the poet is still male. ... So you cannot evade it even if the artwork in no way overtly relates to it [i.e., the canon]. It is formed within the pressure of a gendered history. (192)

Although she has left England and India, Alexander still feels the burden upon her as a member of the marginalized groups of immigrants and women writers. She wants to record her feelings in writing and evoke social justice for these individuals.

Comparing with her previous experiences, Alexander finds her immigration to the United States more “liberating” because it is “a country that honors immigrant stories – unlike England, where I had lived as a student” (Gioseffi 48). In addition, she finds American English “liberating” as well because it allows one “to make a shift into a

different kind of spelling-out of what one might be” (Maxey, 193). However, Alexander also points out that “the enticement, the exhilaration, the compulsive energy of America” is only “up to a point” and “the point, the sticking point, is [her] dark female body” that cannot be shed (202).

Here Alexander is talking about her experience as a woman writer of color in the United States. Her argument is that she encountered a glass ceiling in American academia. As she argues in the memoir, “In place of the hierarchy and authority and decorum that I learned as an Indian woman ... we have an ethnicity that breeds in the perpetual present, that will never be wholly spelt out” (202). She describes her experience of having been denied tenure in a Jesuit university where she worked. Alexander had got negative reviews for not having published in the area where she had been hired (British Romanticism). However, as she confronted the chairman of the department, it turned out that she not only had published in her designated area, but also had published “outside that docket”: poems and articles on Indian English writers, and had been active in giving poetry readings. These academic activities outside her designated area had been labeled as “all quite improper” (115). She felt herself forced back “onto a border existence” as “female, Indian, Other” (114).

Therefore, Alexander is determined to resort to writing to evoke justice in the U.S. academia, as she has done with the Indian canon: “In America the barbed wire is taken into the heart, and the art of an Asian American grapples with a disorder in society, a violence. In our writing we need to evoke a chaos, a power co-equal to the injustice that surround us” (195). She evokes Carlos Bulosan’s novel *America Is in the Heart* (1946) to indicate her goal of writing. Although they are from different decades and target at

different subject matters,² Bulosan and Alexander share the same hope: a hope for equality and social acceptance in their adopted country.

From what we have read in *Fault Lines* about her experience as a woman writer in different countries, we cannot agree with Alexander more when she says “Sometimes I think I have to write myself into being. Write in order not to be erased” (73). Indeed, writing not only frees her from the confined space in which she has been allowed to live and to appear, but also provides her with a unique space she can inhabit and express herself. It is most likely that Chuang Hua and Mukherjee have considered their writing in a similar way as Alexander has, but Alexander is the only one among the three Asian American women in my project who is vocal about performing writing as a woman writer of color. This largely has to do with the genre of Alexander’s work – memoir – that allows readers to hear her own voice. Alexander’s political concern with writing is a performative gesture that enables her to define homemaking in her own way. This leads to the second point I will make about Alexander’s purpose of writing, that is, to perform a spiritual home in writing.

Homemaking via Writing and in Writing: A Performative Stance

As a writer, Alexander loves working with words. When asked about the function of language for her in an interview with Phukan, she makes it clear that language is not a tool or a lens but is “a habitation” for her (66). She thinks what she does as a writer is “to live in language or to make a house with words” (Phukan 66). In another interview with Maxey, she also expresses a similar idea about “inhabiting in language” (191).

Admittedly, what Alexander declares in these interviews has to do with her career as a

writer. However, "inhabiting in language" is also true, metaphorically, in relation to Alexander's homemaking as a migrant.

The displacement she has experienced in a number of countries determines that Alexander is continuing her search for the desired home she has not found. The primary, if not the only, channel of her home-seeking is writing, as she acknowledges in *Fault Lines* that she is writing "in search of a homeland" (3). Alexander's search for home/land is achieved mainly through telling stories (in her novels and poems) and giving accounts of her family history and her own diasporic experience (in her essays and memoir). When putting down stories and translating memories of diaspora to words, Alexander is trying to bring some order to the fragments and chaos of her diasporic experience and feelings, to expose the social and cultural injustice that she has experienced and to find a place that she can call home. In other words, during the process of writing she has acquired a clearer understanding of herself and her place in various cultures, and has found a means of articulation. Therefore, Alexander's home-seeking through writing is also a meaning-making process which contributes to her identity formation as a migrant.

After one of her poetry readings, Alexander said that she had "found a solace, an exit from the self" and told her friend Gauri on her way home: "You know, I don't think I could survive if I didn't write" (*Fault Lines* 176). Writing, therefore, has given her a solace, a feeling of wholeness, and an asylum where she can enjoy the feeling of being at home. Alexander summarizes the relationship between the home and writing in such a way: "Home for me is bound up with a migrant's memory and the way that poetry, even as it draws the shining threads of the imaginary through the crannies of everyday life, permits a dwelling at the edge of the world" (*Fault Lines* 260). I suggest that Alexander

has performed a home in writing, where she has invested her emotions, energy and livelihood.

Unlike Chuang Hua and Mukherjee, whose characters make the home on a cultural and national basis with a specific home model, namely the Chinese pattern for Chuang Hua's and the American one for Mukherjee's characters, Alexander's ideal home is not in the least nationalist, namely without any national identification. In this respect, Alexander's focus is not on the culturally-based home models she has had in the diaspora, whether it be Indian, Sudanese, English or American. Or we would rather say that Alexander is more concerned with the abstract aspect of home, or the spiritual sense of home, and cares more about whether she can feel at home in a certain place so that she can call it home. Of course, we understand that her approach has to do with her diasporic sensibility and the lack of sense of home in the countries she has lived. As it turns out, Alexander argues that the making up of home is "part and parcel of an art of negativity, prais[ing] songs for what remains when the taken-for-grantedness of things falls away" (260). In other words, she first negates the ostensible "homes" one by one, then fabricates a dream place, "a sheltering space in the head" in her memoir to make up for the loss and for the feeling of not being at home (194).

Although Alexander's performative approach to the diasporic home differs from the approaches taken up by Chuang Hua and Mukherjee, her perspective resonates with that of some other ethnic writers, especially a number of diasporic black writers. In *At Home in Diaspora: Black International Writing*, Walters contends that black writers "use their texts to construct alternative homelands"(vii), "to perform a sense of home in diaspora" because neither the home country nor the adopted country has become a "home" to them

(xvii). Like Alexander, some black writers, such as Michelle Cliff, Richard Wright, Chester Himes, Simon Njami, and Caryl Phillips, reject or are rejected by a country of origin and have experienced exploitation and prejudice in their respective adopted countries. As a result, they only feel at home in their writings (Walters xxiii). These similar instances indicate that homemaking in writing is common among many diasporic writers who are not at home in both their country of origin and their adopted country.

Alexander argues in *Fault Lines* that the poet in the twenty-first century is “a homemaker, but an odd one” because she needs to “find a balance, to maintain a home at the edge of the world” (260-61). This image is precisely Alexander’s self portrait, a diasporic woman writer performing a home in writing. In *Fault Lines*, she experiments with the form of memoir and performs an ideal home that is fabricated on multiple levels to suit her desires and needs. To be specific, she reconstructs memories in order to conjure up a complete and perfect image of her ancestral place in India, which serves as a “dwelling place” for her “homeless” spirit.

Alexander’s home performance manifests itself primarily in her fabrication of a desirable home, or “nadu,” in the head. Actually, Alexander’s dream home takes the shape of a physical place, namely her ancestral houses in Kerala, India where she used to live in her childhood. As she explains, “*Nadu* is the Malayalam word for home, for homeland. Tiruvella, where my mother’s home, Kuruchiethu House, stands, and Kozencheri, where appa’s home, Kannadical House, stands, together compose my nadu, the dark soil of self” (23). In *Fault Lines* there are repeated descriptions of her ancestral place, which she calls a shining picture of home. The following is one of the numerous images of that place:

My mother's ancestral house with its garden, a single street in front that runs all the way to the old Mar Thoma Church, palm trees, a few buffaloes ambling in the heat. And near the courtyard where the vine is, a well with clear water. And near the well a guava tree with rich freckled fruit. And always the cries of playing children, or women bending over to thresh the rice. (197)

Such an image of the ancestral place is Alexander's favorite. She has mentioned it repeatedly on different occasions in *Fault Lines*. This ancestral house gives her the feeling of home that she longs to have. I would say that it is the connotation (or suggested meaning) of the ancestral place rather than the house itself that appeals to her. However, it does not follow that Alexander has given readers a realist picture of the house. As we learn from *Fault Lines*, the ancestral place turns out to be a performed image rather than a real object. In other words, it is an ameliorated image through Alexander's reconstructed memory. Alexander is well aware of this fantasy, or we can say that she has done so deliberately. As she cautions readers as well as herself, "But the house of memory is fragile; made up in the mind's space. Even what I remember best, I am forced to admit, is what has flashed up for me in the face of present danger, at the tail end of the century, where everything is to be elaborated, spelt out, precariously reconstructed. And there is little sanctity, even in remembrance"(3).

We cannot help wondering why Alexander employs the reconstructed version of memory and at the same time acknowledges having used it in the memoir, which is supposed to be based on facts. The epigraph for the section "Book of Childhood" in *Fault Lines* highlights the significance of such a strategy. It is a passage from Walter Benjamin's *Berlin Chronicle*, which begins as follows:

Language shows clearly that memory is not an instrument for exploring the past but its theater. It is the medium of past experience, as the ground is the medium in which dead cities lie interred. He who seeks to approach his own buried past must conduct himself like a man digging. This confers the tone and bearing of genuine reminiscences. (227)

In quoting Benjamin, Alexander makes it clear that she is concerned with the tone of her memoir rather than staying loyal to historical facts. She cares more about the perspective from which she can best present her views than about these facts. This calls our attention to creative non-fiction, or the “hybrid” or “outlaw” form of autobiography in Caren Kaplan’s terms,³ that blurs the distinction between reality and fiction. These are forms that marginal individuals such as women, ethnic and immigrant authors employ as strategic political moves because they do not wish to write their lives according to the culturally available scripts. As Carolyn Heilbrun puts it, marginal writers such as women “have been deprived of narratives, or the texts, plots, or examples, by which they might assume power over—take control of their own lives” (16-17). As a result, they make use of and manipulate some life events in their autobiographies and “present themselves as they wanted to be appreciated and perceived” as a means of resistance against the forces that may silence them (Huguley 17). Accordingly, Alexander’s strategy of making up memory falls under such a collectively subversive autobiographical form. She argues in her interview with Maxey that she has to make things up in order to make memoir, even to make up memories at some level, because she is “constructing it in the framework of the present” (191).

My argument is that Alexander's diasporic experiences and sense of dislocation necessitate the reconstruction of her past through memory so that she can have "a sheltering space in the head" (194). As she admits, she needs to "make up memory," to construct "a provisional self to live by" (177). In an interview with Gioseffi, Alexander also explains that she has to "fabricate place so that these images can exist, not as mere bits and pieces of temporality, echoing in my inwardness, but as portions of a shining symbolic space" (4).

The performed ancestral place serves several functions in the memoir. First, whenever Alexander feels homesick, she conjures up the shining ancestral house. As with many immigrants, pictures, talks or memories of the hometown can somewhat alleviate such depressive feeling. Hence Alexander explains: "Pathos, a homesickness that is never sated. When I think of homesickness, the Tiruvella house where Ilya lived rises up for me... But in dreams that house becomes one with the other great house of my childhood, the Kozencheri house that belongs to my father and his father before him" (30-31).

More importantly, the image of the ancestral home is a solace to Alexander in times of stress and trouble. It is like a shelter, although merely a spiritual one, where she can hide and recover and have a peace of mind and some respite. That is why she highlights its necessity to her: "it's as if in all these years as a poet I had carried a simple shining geography around with me: a house with a courtyard where I grew up in Tiruvella" (197). In addition, the ancestral houses are where Alexander spent her childhood, a happy and carefree period in everyone's life. In imagining herself in these places again, Alexander can re-experience the happy feeling as if in childhood. In this way, the ancestral place can provide spiritual backup, a base she can always return to from her numerous "battles"

against social injustice as a woman poet. Therefore there are Alexander's dialectical remarks: "because it was, I am whole and entire. I do not need to think in order to be... And this stubborn, shinning thing persisted for me. It has done so for so many years" (197).

Therefore to meet numerous needs at present, Alexander reconstructs her memory to fabricate an ideal ancestral home. We can say that she has "performed" her memory to create a spiritual home. Alexander's performance of the memory resides in making up details for things she no longer remembers and omitting some past events that she does not want to remember. In the first case, she intends to provide a complete and perfect picture of her childhood, so she ends up making up details in order for the past to return. Such is the case with Alexander's depiction of her years in Khartoum. As she explains, "I needed to make up that memory, which didn't exist... for that was the only way that Khartoum could come back to me ...so I could live in the here and now of America" (190). As we learn from the memoir, Alexander consulted her mother time and again about some past happenings and filled them up in the void of her memory. In the same manner, Alexander's attachment to her ancestral house in Kerala, India deepens with time, "adding layer upon layer to the soil of [her] imagination" (71).

Another reason that prompted Alexander to "perform" her memory is the unpleasant or unspeakable truth she does not want to reveal. It is her traumatic childhood experience of sexual harassment by the Ilya (or grandfather) she respected. She has kept her trauma and sorrow all to herself over the years, not even having revealed it to her parents. The record of this trauma was absent from the first edition of *Fault Lines* published in 1993. According to Alexander, it takes time for her to learn to "absorb this

difficult truth into [her]self" (242). Only ten years later, in 2003, did she decide to disclose this painful truth in the second edition of her memoir. Alexander added a new section entitled "Book of Childhood" in the republished memoir, a section that makes up one-third space of the entire book. As she painfully reveals,

Later I was able, bit by bit, to feel rage at an old man, my grandfather who had torn my innocent childhood, cut my woman's life so that desire for me was ever after etched in with the sharpened stick of pain and always in my mind was Lavinia, she who I had seen on the stage at Stratford a lifetime ago, hands cut off, tongue torn out, forced to set a twig to her teeth to spell out the name of the man who had violated her... Sorrow concealed. I ponder the phrase. How slowly I learn to breach the firewall of my own heart. (242)

For Alexander, she could not bear to remember so that she attempted to erase the trauma from her memory. But as part of the self-healing process, she also tried to learn to remember. Therefore she turned to books for help. She records her self-healing process as follows:

I picked through any books I could find on trauma and trauma theory. I taught myself to accept that there is knowledge that is too much for the nervous system to bear, that disappears underground, but sparks up through fault lines. I learnt again that the body remembers when consciousness is numbed, that there is an instinctual truth of the body all the laws of the world combined cannot legislate away. (242)

Leigh Gilmore argues in *The Limits of Autobiography: Trauma and Testimony* that trauma is a key site where the generic boundaries between fiction and non-fiction, the

imagined and the real are deconstructed.⁴ As theorists such as Gilmore suggest, many writers of traumatic narratives choose to turn from the autobiographical form to fiction for self-representation in order to avoid being put in the position of being scrutinized and judged by readers and critics. Alexander's approach to the trauma narrative, however, is quite different from what is suggested by the theorists. Instead of turning her life into a story, she insists on writing in the form of memoir, only that her memoir is "performed" to some extent by omission or fabrication of important details. Alexander defends herself for this strategy in *Fault Lines*: "I tell myself that it is entirely natural to hide from pain. Hence this dream state. The shock to the nervous system, the betrayal of childhood love is not something one recovers from easily. I needed to believe, to trust, in order to survive as a child. I needed not to remember" (272). I suggest that Alexander is braver than some authors of trauma narratives in choosing the memoir as her means of self-representation. Although she had removed her traumatic experience from the first edition of the memoir and produced a perfect image of her childhood home, she was ready to reveal the truth in the second edition. Such a significant revision, however, has not changed the performative feature of her memoir on the whole. It only serves as a signpost to demonstrate the necessity of a performative approach to diasporic homemaking, especially for people like her who need a spiritual sanctuary.

Alexander's performance of memory for a better image of home may lead us to think that she is nostalgic. But Alexander expresses the opposite view in *Fault Lines*. On one hand, she says that immigrants and ethnic individuals should not forget their past and original cultures because these are their heritage, and "forgetfulness of the body can also be a death" for them, specifically for writers (200). But she cautions simultaneously that

these individuals should not lose themselves in nostalgia, either, because the “shining past fractures, [can] never ... be reassembled” (201). She makes it clear that the past is only usable for the present, and the present is what marginalizes people. According to her, Asian Americans should strive “to invade, to confront, to seize” because of their shared present experience of being treated as the Other (202). Thus Alexander advocates an attitude of being attentive to both the past and the present. As she says:

There are so many strands all running together in a bright snarl of life. I cannot unpick it, take it apart, strand by strand. That would lose the quick of things.

My job is to evoke it all, altogether. For that is what my ethnicity requires, that is what America with its hotshot present tense compels me to. (198)

We can see that Alexander’s attitude towards her ethnic past is not nostalgia or contentment; rather, she advocates using the past strategically to better life at present. I suggest that her strategic use of the past, at least partly, is to perform it for her homemaking purpose in America. Alexander has translated her ancestral house in India, for example, into a place of solace in writing, and by doing so she has performed a spiritual home for herself, as a writer and migrant.

In addition to reconstructing and making up memory, Alexander also performs her ancestral home by inventing or omitting details about her family members to serve her needs at present. She has portrayed Ilya as a perfect grandfather who gave her love and instruction in her childhood. Removed from her depiction is his sexual harassment. Alexander did so because she intended to create the illusion of an ideal ancestral home that she can always turn to for spiritual support. She has achieved her goal partly by performing the image of a perfect grandfather, although at the cost of a great

psychological burden. When she immigrated to America and was still suffering from the feeling of dislocation, Alexander longed for a wise “ancestral figure” for inspiration and spiritual support. Thus she invented details about her grandmother Kunju who she has never seen. As she says, “I skipped a whole ring of life and made up a grandmother figure, part ghost, part flesh. She was drawn over what I had learnt of grandmother Kunju. I imagined her: a sensitive, cultured woman; a woman who had a tradition, and a history” (15). By inventing grandmother Kunju, Alexander hopes that the latter’s experience as a well-known nationalist in Indian history can inspire her in her struggle for social justice as an immigrant woman writer in America. She argues in *The Shock of Arrival* that the experience of fighting against patriarchy and sexism in India and other patriarchal cultures may help immigrant women in fighting against racism and prejudice in the West, for these two kinds of oppression resemble each other in their unjust nature (83). It seems that Alexander has achieved her goal by performing the figure of Kunju.

Performing the Genre of Autobiography

Alexander’s home performance is accomplished by performance in another sphere, that is, by performing the literary genre of autobiography. As is indicated in the subtitle, *Fault Lines* is a memoir written in the late twentieth century that saw a boom of autobiographical writings.⁵ Since antiquity, when the form of autobiography started, it has been employed traditionally by public figures, usually white men, for accounts of their personal lives. Yet in modern times, many ordinary people have taken up autobiography and expanded the genre. The twentieth century, in particular, witnessed a flourish of autobiography, which became increasingly popular with marginalized

individuals such as women, immigrants, minorities and homosexuals, especially in the closing decades of the century. Many writers experimented with the limitations of autobiography, revised and subverted the tradition. They merged individual and collective voices in writing and employed a number of unconventional strategies that “explore the challenges of identity and self-representation in diverse ways and through diverse media” (Kulbaga, “‘Outlaw’ Genres”).⁶ Like many women and immigrant autobiographers, Alexander is a genre subversive who has dialogue with and “performs” this literary genre for her own desires and needs. As I discuss earlier in this chapter about Alexander’s identity politics, she has merged individual and collective voices in her memoir to claim a home space for herself and for other marginalized individuals such as women, immigrants and women writers of color who have met with similar problems. Placing Alexander among other genre subversives of autobiographical writings enables us to better appreciate her performative stance and homemaking strategies in *Fault Lines*.

Like autobiographical works by many marginalized individuals, Alexander’s *Fault Lines* subverts the genre in many ways. Alexander has made some generic experiments in self-representation, such as fragmented narration, blending of genres, dialogue with her text and with the reader, and blurring the distinction between reality and fiction. These experiments, as Theresa Kulbaga argues, must be read not as a mode of postmodernist “play” but as cultural responses to uneven material histories and development because “‘border crossing’ for these authors names a contemporary process fraught with risks and burdens that, when inscribed autobiographically, confronts the problem of citizenship at the level of genre” (2781). To put it differently, these subversive autobiographers,

including Alexander, need to experiment with new expressions to respond to their marginal positions in the literary canon and in real lives. In Butler's terms, they are all performers – performers of the literary genre.

One of the performative strategies Alexander has adopted is fragmented narration without chronological order. *Fault Lines* is constructed mainly around Alexander's memories and emotions about the places and countries where she has lived as a migrant. Introduction about her extended Indian family and her own experience serves as a narrative line but not a primary one. In her narrative, she shuttles back and forth between time and space, triggered by images of and emotions about a certain place. As she comments on this technique in *Fault lines*, "I obviously write a certain kind of prose that is, in its texture, closer to the sorts of little knots that an embroiderer uses. The way it works is through an image rather than emplotment" (Maxey 190).

Alexander also experiments with the limits of autobiography as a literary form. In *Fault Lines* her writing flows between prose and verse. Alexander admits that she is not "a great plot person," therefore her use of very short paragraphs in the memoir, sometimes only two lines, is "something that comes from the poem rather than from a certain kind of prose" (Maxey 190-91). In an interview with Atreyee Phukan, Alexander explains that this rare style of hers allows her "to break up the hegemony of one kind of discourse and, already then, the page is broken up and you have another kind of speech" (68). According to Alexander, she uses the prose essay or fiction to "try and reflect on where this other, new place is [such as about migration and crossing borders]," almost like "a clearing of the underbrush, going ahead as if you're on uncharted territory"(Maxey 190). She explains that she uses the poem "to make up a place, a

palimpsest, so there is always density of layers, languages under languages, places behind places” (Phukan 68). Therefore, such mixing of genres enables Alexander to express her needs and emotions freely without the constraint of forms. This unconventional narrative strategy is a perfect medium for her similarly unconventional manner of “homemaking”: a home in writing that follows no established patterns.

In *Fault Lines*, Alexander makes frequent comments on her text, a subversive approach to autobiographical writing. Examples abound in the memoir. She tells readers that she draws on her memory for accounts of her life in the past, but she adds immediately:

But the house of memory is fragile; made up in the mind’s space. Even what I remember best, I am forced to admit, is what has flashed up for me in the face of present danger, at the tail end of the century, where everything is to be elaborated, spelt out, precariously reconstructed. And there is little sanctity, even in remembrance. (3)

Her caution about the constructed nature, or unreliability, of her own memory gives her memoir a subversive turn. At the beginning of the added section “Book of Childhood” in the republished memoir, Alexander admits having concealed her childhood trauma in the previous edition. As she writes, “But what of the book *Fault Lines* I wrote a decade ago? My aim is not to cross out what I first wrote but to deepen that writing, dig under it, even to the point of overturning one of the most cherished figures I created” (229). In doing so, Alexander draws readers’ attention to the performative approach she uses on many different levels (such as literary form, imagery, memory and homemaking), which turns out to be the essence of her memoir.

In addition to these strategies, Alexander has employed another unconventional approach: blurring the distinction between reality and fiction by making up historical details and memory, which I called a performative approach earlier in this chapter. I suggest that this performative approach is the most subversive and most political strategy of all in *Fault Lines* in relation to experimenting with the form of autobiography. It is Alexander's creative response to the "double-voicedness" in autobiographical writings by marginal writers such as women and immigrants.

Sidonie Smith believes that women's life narratives share a "double voiced structure," which "reveals the tensions between their desire for narrative authority and their concern about excessive exposure" (Smith 12). According to Smith, a woman's role has been predetermined for her in a male-dominated society. Therefore, when a woman determines to speak up in her self narratives, she is always worrying about how to find a voice against her prescribed role in the society. Some scholars have broached a strategy that many women autobiographers have employed in resolving the problem, that is, to depict their lives selectively or add creative or fictional elements to their portrayals so that they can "present themselves as they wanted to be appreciated and perceived" as a means of resistance against the forces that may silence them (Huguley 17).⁷

Contemporary critics and scholars have expanded the discussion about women autobiographers' subversion of the genre and included works by other marginal individuals such as immigrants, homosexuals and people from minority ethnic groups. They call such life writings "hybrid" or "outlaw" genres.⁸ In "Resisting Autobiography: Out-Law Genres and Transnational Feminist Subjects" (1992), Caren Kaplan contends that hybrid autobiographical forms constitute strategic political moves for women, ethnic,

and immigrant authors who do not wish to write their lives according to culturally available scripts. To bring the discussion back to my current project, I would say that Alexander is one of the marginal autobiographers who have employed a performative strategy in writing their lives. She is consciously performing this literary genre as a migrant woman of color and deliberately blurring the boundary between reality and fiction. By doing so, Alexander has created a form that enables her to present her life as she desires and perform an ideal home in writing that has been unavailable to her in real life.

As Piper Huguley observes, some subversive narrative approaches that many women autobiographers have employed “could be dubbed political,” such as “inserting politically driven treatises, footnoting and indexing their work, commenting on the text as it was created, omitting discussion of their personal business, and even including photographs as if the work were a biography” (9). We find that Alexander has used some of the political strategies Huguley has introduced. Alexander has inserted ten family photographs in *Fault Lines*, for example, and has commented on her text. Although Alexander has not inserted “politically driven treatises,” many of her passages have obvious political implications, such as those that critiques sexism in India, racial discrimination in England and America. These subversive approaches in *Fault Lines* indicate that Alexander is conscious of her position in the tradition of autobiographical writing and of her political strategies in challenging and transforming the genre. In other words, she has positioned herself as a genre subversive and aims to make a home for herself in the literary canon.

The subversive nature of Alexander's literary representation determines that she may differ from other subversive autobiographers in her narrative strategies. We have identified some distinctions in *Fault Lines*. To begin with, Alexander has not relied on some culturally-sanctioned forms of expression to give her narrative a recognizable trajectory and broad cultural currency. She has not used the bildungsroman, for example, that has been popular with some immigrant, ethnic, and women autobiographers and fiction writers, among them Bharati Mukherjee.⁹ Alexander is one of the well-known Asian American writers, that is, she has "made it" in the United States. But she has not delineated in her memoir how she has strived for her American dream, which again distinguishes her from Mukherjee who depicts in *Jasmine* immigrant characters' pursuit of American dream. Instead, Alexander has uttered a unique narrative voice free from the constraints of the traditional autobiography. In particular, she has performed this literary form by omitting, ameliorating and fabricating materials of her own life. In doing so, Alexander joins the present and the past, two elements indispensable for understanding Asian American identity, and performs a viable home in writing that she can always turn to for spiritual sustenance.

Although the plural and political gesture about diaspora identity and homemaking in *Fault Lines* makes it resonate with many marginal writers, Alexander is not writing it on behalf of all immigrants and women, or on all issues concerning these individuals. There are areas that she has not covered in her writing. Lavina Shankar points out that Alexander neglects the fact that "America is vast and heterogeneous and that even within the US, local demographics and social class positions affect racial identities and identifications" (291). I would like to add that Alexander has not provided other viable

solutions to or suggestions about problems she has brought up in her works, for example, about options that people in other professions can adopt, to solve their identity crisis or to help make a viable home. However, as a writer Alexander's strategy of performing the home via writing and in writing is itself a viable solution, as far as her own diasporic sensibility is concerned. Furthermore, I would suggest that her performative strategy is neither a pessimistic one nor is it her last resort. For Alexander, art is part of the "collective nonviolent resistance" (*Shock of Arrival* 163), and a means for marginal writers and artists to interpret the world and perhaps also change it. Hence by advocating homemaking in writing, Alexander is actually adding to the options for marginalized individuals to cope with their sense of dislocation and identity problems. As she argues, "At the tail of the century, it is part and parcel of our project of creating a shared dwelling place. In its response to this challenge, contemporary Asian-American art becomes part of our essential knowledge" (*Shock of Arrival* 163).

Endnotes

¹ Nationalistic paradigm in Asian American literature is articulated in works such as *Aiiieeee: An Anthology of Asian American Writers* by Jeffrey Paul Chan, Frank Chin, and Lawson Fusao Inada (Howard UP, 1974); *The Big AIIIEEEEE!: An Anthology of Chinese American and Japanese American Literature* edited by Frank Chin, Jeffrey Paul Chan, Lawson Fusao Inada, and Shawn Wong (Penguin USA, 1991). See Shankar, "Postcolonial Diasporics," 285-312 for more details.

² Bulosan is Filipino (1911?-1956), writing about the hard life of early Filipino workers in the United States.

³ Caren Kaplan, "Resisting Autobiography: Out-law Genres and Transnational Feminist Subjects." *De/Colonizing the Subject: The Politics of Gender in Women's Autobiography*. Ed. Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1992. 115-138.

⁴ See "Autobiography and Trauma."

⁵ Some scholars and critics use "autobiography" as an umbrella term, incorporating different subclasses or varieties. Still in recent years some prefer to use more pointed terms such as "self narrative," "self-authored life writing" to include all types of autobiographical texts. In this project the term "autobiography" is used in a general sense to include subclasses such as memoir.

⁶ Proponents of contemporary autobiographical criticism, such as Michael Sheringham, Jeremy Downton Hazlett and John Sturrock, argue that the autobiographical "I" is a "multiple, changing, plural construct." Many critics have observed that there is a

plural feature in women's, immigrant and ethnic life writings due to their similar marginal status in many cultures and countries. See Edwards, 11-12; Doris Sommer 107.

⁷ Such subversive strategies can even be traced back to women's early writings in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries such as Aphra Behn. Behn was among the first to perceive the unreliability of a realistic representation of the self and thus mixed fiction and reality in her autobiographical writings to challenge "the symbolic order that placed women under the control of their fathers' society through a set of laws that made it extremely problematic for a seventeenth century woman to utter the word 'I'" (Lamarra 3).

Examples of such a performative strategy abound in life narratives by modern and contemporary women, Gertrude Stein, Theresa Hak Kyung Cha, Anzia Yeziarska and Maxine Hong Kingston, to name a few. Yeziarska's autobiography *Red Ribbon on a White Horse* (1950), for instance, is a deliberate mixture of fiction and fact. A life narrative that tells the story of how Yeziarska made singular and determined sacrifices for a writing career, *Red Ribbon on a White Horse* contains many omissions of facts as well as fictionalized details. Yeziarska presented herself in the narrative as a single woman in her thirties choosing to be a writer, but the fact is she had married twice, divorced her second husband and placed her daughter with the father so that she could devote herself fully to writing. As Huguley observes, "the omission of this and other material[s] from *Red Ribbon* may express Yeziarska's concern that harsh judgment would have awaited her in the conservative atmosphere of the early 1950's when the work was published" (160). According to Huguley, Yeziarska's main concern was not to discourage potential writers with the "harsh truth," or "price paid to become a writer,"

especially to become a woman writer (160). Thus the good intention to delineate an easier life for women writers led Yeziarska to fictionalize herself in her life narrative, subverting the expectations of autobiographical works.

⁸ See Kulbaga, "Outlaw' Genres."

⁹ See "Culture And Identity: Narrative Strategies."

CHAPTER V

CONCLUSION

This project has read Asian American writers' representations of diasporic homemaking from a performative approach initiated by Judith Butler in her theory of performativity. My readings of the works of fiction and non-fiction by Chuang Hua, Bharati Mukherjee and Meena Alexander show that although they differ from one another in many ways, these texts display a commonality: a performative feature of the diasporic home. In all of the works, Asian immigrants who have finally settled down in the United States perform the home on various models that are desirable or available to them. These performances of the diasporic home demonstrate the dynamic and complex process of immigrant identity transformation and assimilation. However, in this project such a reading strategy has been associative in relation to three specific texts by contemporary Asian American women writers: *Crossings*, *Jasmine* and *Fault Lines*. In this conclusion I would like to supplement my description by generalizing the application of the performative approach to literary works about diasporic homemaking.

First of all, a performative approach can be a useful tool for analyzing diaspora literature in general because homemaking has been immigrants' primary concern no matter what culture or country they are from. Since homemaking is a series of actions that reenact rituals, customs, familial and social structures, the home registers homemakers' identities on personal, social and cultural levels. Homemaking, therefore, is

a matter of “doing” rather than of “being.” Such “doing” of home is performative because it enacts and reenacts patterns and relations dictated by a particular culture in which homemakers are situated. But this performative feature of the home is usually implicit because people take a certain pattern of homemaking for granted if they live within the same cultural milieu for a long period. However, diaspora jeopardizes the original cultural identity and conception of home that immigrants have carried with them. Their process of making new homes in the adopted countries makes the performative feature of home more explicit. Due to different identifications with and/or restrictions of their heritage culture and host culture, immigrants end up making various choices as to what home models to follow. It could be the ancestral pattern they have carried along with them in diaspora, a totally different model that appeals to them more in a new cultural milieu, or a hybrid pattern mixing the old and the new. Such diversified performances of the home, in turn, demonstrate and contribute to immigrants’ identity (trans)formation. Thus the diasporic home is a good site for us to observe the performative feature of homemaking and cultural identity. In other words, Butler’s performativity theory offers us a useful tool to analyze the process of “doing” home in diaspora literature. Admittedly, patterns of diasporic homes may vary with time, location and ethnic groups due to different historical, social and cultural factors, but cultural identification and assimilation are two common threads uniting all these home performances.

Given the short history of Asian American literature and the history of U.S. immigration laws against Asians, Asian immigrants’ homemaking acts displayed some common features before 1965 when they were still under the impact of the exclusion acts. Pre-1965 Asian American writers mostly represented immigrant homemaking from two

established approaches, that is, their characters either perform the home on their traditional home model or mainstream American pattern to show their cultural identification and (im)possibility of assimilation. In contrast, contemporary Asian American literature has produced a wider variety of representations in relation to diasporic home performances due to globalization and change in U.S. immigration policy. That explains why I have chosen contemporary Asian American writing as my subject.

There seems to be a tendency, however, for contemporary Asian American writers to be increasingly open with their representation of immigrants and diasporic homemaking, as is indicated in the texts I have discussed in this projects. This has much to do with the time period in which these works were written. Among the three texts I have discussed, Chuang Hua's *Crossings* (1968) merely hints at immigrants' feeling of dislocation in America. Her characters' performances of the Chinese home are insinuations about American immigration laws against Asians at a time when immigrants' lives were still not easy. Mukherjee's protagonist in *Jasmine* (1989) fully enjoys freedom of action and individualism in her homemaking in America. We can discern the influence of the civil rights movement and feminism from her depictions. Alexander's *Fault Lines* (1993) is the most explicit in conveying immigrants' feeling of dislocation and difficulty of homemaking. Her straightforward articulation can be accounted for by her use of autobiography as the medium of expression, a genre that was a boom in the late twentieth century and is increasingly popular with marginal individuals such as women, immigrants, minorities and homosexuals. Therefore, diasporic

homemaking and its representation are affected by many factors, among them different time periods and socio-cultural circumstances.

As is shown in the chapters, ethnic community has not been a focus of immigrant homemaking in these post-1965 literary works. Immigrant communities usually play a significant part in the early years of Asian immigration in America, mostly before 1965 and also at present for many lower-middle class immigrants who have to rely on the aid and resources of ethnic communities in order to settle down in a new nation. The perspective that Chuang Hua, Mukherjee and Alexander have adopted suggests that social class is another factor in their downplaying of ethnic communities in their narratives. These three writers are all of middle or upper-middle class background, are financially independent and can make it by their own effort with little benefit from their respective ethnic communities. Autobiographical or with autobiographical elements, their writings undoubtedly convey their own views about these communities. I believe it will be helpful to look at other diaspora and immigrant writings that may attach more significance to the ethnic community in order to have a more complete picture of immigrant homemaking and identity transformation.

The focus of my project is Asian American women writers. I would like to extend my discussion here to works by their male counterparts. Performances of the diasporic home are also manifest in some works by Asian American men, although their writings are not as diversified as those by women. In comparison with women writers, Asian American men have somewhat different approaches to representing the diasporic home. A striking difference is that post-1965 men seldom write about the home or homemaking. The few works that center upon the diasporic home or community were mostly produced

from the 1940s to the 1970s when the U.S. immigration policies towards Asians were still harsh for the most part. Male writers' representations of the diasporic home, therefore, tend to be more conventional with focuses on the dysfunctional or oppressive diasporic home and community, the inability to feel at home and make the home, among other subjects. I would suggest that their immigrant characters perform the negative aspect of the diasporic home and sometimes at the spiritual level. Chinese American writers such as Frank Chin and Louis Chu depicted the dysfunctional diasporic Chinese community as a result of U.S immigration exclusion laws. The Chinese home and immigrant community in their works are usually decayed and oppressive for young men so that they must escape for their own future development. Japanese American writer John Okada conveys a similar idea about the diasporic community in *No-No Boy* (1978) against the backdrop of World War II and the internment of Japanese immigrants. In Okada's description, the diasporic Japanese community mimics the original home in Japan, where the woman plays the role of cultural preserver and inhibits men's Americanization. In Okada's narrative, Japanese young men must get away from the immigrant community for their own good. Thus the diasporic home in some Asian American men's works resembles the oppressive Indian community depicted in Mukherjee's *Jasmine*. Since few Asian American men have described how to make the home specifically, I would suggest that they are more concerned with articulating the feeling of homelessness that Asian immigrants, usually Asian men, have experienced. Such rendering of the unavailable home resembles Alexander's approach to home in *Fault Lines*. In other words, some of the male writers seem to share Alexander's concern with the spiritual level of the diasporic home.

Considering that the women writers in this project all incorporate gender roles in their representations of the diasporic home, it is helpful to compare how Asian American men depict the home in this respect. In the narratives by the three women, the ancestral home is usually a traditional and patriarchal place (no matter whether or not they cherish the cultural heritage embodied by it), and the diasporic community is equally patriarchal and oppressive to women. When I turn to the few available works by male writers for the image of the diasporic home, I find ethnic distinctions in the way gender roles are delineated in relation to the home. Chinese American men usually describe the Chinese home and Chinese community as a patriarchal place in which women are subservient to men and follow strictly the expected rules of behavior, such as in Louis Chu's *Eat a Bowl of Tea* and in Frank Chin's *The Year of the Dragon*. Okada delineates the diasporic Japanese home as traditional but represents Japanese women, rather than Japanese men, as cultural preservers who inhibit men's cultural transformation in America. Ichiro's mother in Okada's *No-No Boy* is an example of such negative women figures. Some male writers of Indian or Filipino origins often portray immigrant men's fascination with white women to indicate their eagerness to participate in the dominant culture and to have "romance" with America. The tradition and the ethnic woman are both these male characters' secondary options in their homemaking in the new world. Boman Desai's *The Memory of Elephants* provides a salient example of such representations. In this respect, these male writers' representation of immigrant homemaking echoes Mukherjee's in *Jasmine*, in which the protagonist is intent on making a home with a white man. Having "romance" with America, therefore, seems to be a general pattern of postcolonial individuals' homemaking in the West.

Since I have discussed works by women writers with Chinese and South Asian background, I believe that a useful way to augment the examination of the complexity of diasporic homemaking is to ask how the diasporic home might be similarly or differently fashioned in works by writers of other cultural backgrounds, such as by writers from other Asian countries and from other continents. Scholarship on black studies shows that numerous immigrants of African origins have a diasporic sensibility and share Asian Americans' difficulty of homemaking in their adopted countries due to the former group's displacement and racial discrimination (or history of slavery) in the receiving nations. Critics and writers, male and female alike, have expressed their concern for black immigrants' problems in one way or another. Cultural critic Stuart Hall, for example, has drawn on black experiences in the Caribbean and European countries and formulated his famous theory about diaspora and cultural identity, specifically about the "constant transformation" of cultural identity in diaspora and the identity politics of self "positioning" (225). Wendy Walters, among other scholars on black studies, has observed African diasporic individuals' lack of a coherent subject position. In *At Home in Diaspora* (2005), Waters analyzes works by writers of African origins such as Richard Wright, Michell Cliff, Chester Himes, Simon Njami and Caryl Phillips, who are all "doubly displaced" (in Waters' words, they are "diasporic first and migrant second") and thus share a desire to claim a home "in the language of literary narrative as a direct result of experiencing racial exclusions 'at home'" (xv-xvii). Like Alexander, these writers of African origin are performing home via writing and in writing. Therefore, the performative approach to home is also applicable to them.

With the publishing of more works by Asian American writers and scholars and by people of other cultural groups, we can expect more diversified representations and examinations of the diasporic home and homemaking. I hope to participate in continuing conversation about how immigrant homemaking contribute to identity transformation, especially by using the theory of performativity to analyze performances of the home. These dialogues will need to notice the overlaps and distinctions between individuals and ethnic groups in order for us to have a better understanding of how diaspora shapes immigrant homemaking, and also notice how the diasporic home may be shaped by the interactions of various forces such as culture, ethnicity, social class and gender.

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