

## **Refugee in the Land of Redemption: Serial Migration as a Theme in Contemporary Fiction about South Asia**

NIVEDITHA KALARIKKAL

### **Abstract**

*Literary narratives of displacement and expatriation from the third world to the first world nations have been characteristically different from the accounts which depict diasporic experiences across the countries of the 'global south.' Feelings of homelessness and the trauma of past experiences undergone by the exiles and refugees across various South Asian countries due to political conflict, partition, ethnic cleansing, natural calamities etc. in the past few decades have been the focus of various diasporic writings from the region. Fictional narratives from the region illustrating serial migrations are fewer in number. The depiction of South Asian Atlantic experiences in a few recent fictional writings by Prajwal Parajuly and Bapsi Sidhwa is marked by the central theme of serial migration. The South Asian characters who appear in the texts that are analysed appear to be in a double bind since their origins in a different part of the world continue to mark them as cultural 'outsiders' though the 'promise of the first world' is supposed to compensate for that crisis. The dual lives of the immigrants in the first world and the synecdoche of home that marks one's painful past become central to the short stories of Sidhwa which appear in *The Language of Love* and in Parajuly's novel *Land Where I Flee*. The memories of past violence or fear of homelessness in the life of a refugee in a neighbouring third world country are shown to be giving way to moments of resilience, relief and redemption during his/her subsequent move to the first world in these works. The paper tries to delineate the representation of South Asian lived experiences in the works under discussion and how it is affected by*

*creating a dichotomy of the old/ transformed selves undergoing migration.*

**Keywords:** Serial migration, South Asian-Atlantic experience, Refugee, Political conflict.

The topography of South Asia is characterised by the intersection of multiple linguistic regions and a variety of overlapping literary traditions. For example, there are well-known literary traditions of Hindustani that parted ways into Hindi and Urdu and the literature in other official languages of South Asian countries that occupied the central position in various literary discussions of the last two centuries. Similarly, there are lesser-known oratures and written literature in languages like Maithili, Pashto, and Saraiki etc, which also constitute and reflect the South Asian lived experiences. Nonetheless, the expansion of an English readership in South Asian countries' metropolis has resulted in a bulk of English writings from the region with a renewed domination in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The English language has played a central role in shaping the everyday life experiences of those South Asian writers like Agha Shahid Ali who have spent long years in the Anglophone world and those like Salman Rushdie who has settled down in these countries. English is thus the natural choice of creative expression for many writers who have grown up in South Asian cities and those with South Asian origins who have migrated to the Anglophone world later in their lives.

### **South Asian Migrant Experiences in English Fiction**

One can trace a network of influences that brings together many South Asian migrant writers' experiences in their works of fiction and the themes of immigration adopted by them. Moreover, certain similarities can be drawn out based on narrative patterns employed in their works and techniques of vernacular experimentation adopted by these writers. While

most such intersections result from sharing the same network of literary influences, the themes and narrative patterns of these works can vary drastically depending on the nature of migrant experiences depicted in them. For example, Monica Ali's *Brick Lane* (2003) and Deepak Unnikrishnan's *Temporary People* (2016) illustrate the hardships suffered by immigrant labourers from South Asia and their feelings of displacement in Britain and UAE. Kamala Markandaya's *The Nowhere Man* (1972) and Bharati Mukherjee's *Jasmine* (1989) foreground the questions of identity and acculturation related to the lives of the South Asian diaspora in London and Iowa. Mukherjee's *Jasmine* is among the many diasporic writings from the Anglophone world that "reveals the pressure felt by an immigrant in American society- the pressure to assimilate" (Grewal 1996:99).

A considerable amount of South Asian migrant experiences in English fall under the category of South Asian Atlantic writings, where the Anglophone world partly shapes the protagonists' and writers' lives. Interestingly, in many fictional works under this category of writings, a syncretic cultural identity is often projected as the essential feature of the protagonists' subjectivity. Most of the early diasporic fiction from the Anglophone world is tinged by a yearning to return to one's roots and nostalgia for one's homeland. At the same time, there are works which focus on the lives of exiles and expatriates from South Asia which reflect "an urgent need to reconstitute their lives, usually by choosing to see themselves as part of a triumphant ideology or a restored people" (Said 1994:140-41). This paper attempts to bring together a couple of such fictional works that depict South Asian refugee lives in America, where the impossibility of a homecoming marks the protagonists' lives. These works were published for two consecutive years, and the experience of serial migration shapes the lives of South Asian protagonists in both these

works. The protagonists of these works belong to the marginal groups in their countries of origin when these South Asian nation-states start formulating the idea of their national subjects in an essentialist way. "The pathos of exile" gets reflected in their "loss of contact with the solidity and satisfaction of earth" in Saidian terms (142). At the same time, escape to America gets projected as a crucial step in bringing an end to the crisis in their lives. The migration to America is often shown as a redemptive act in many refugee and exile narratives from the East. Scott Ury states that the "Jewish flight from persecution in Eastern Europe has consistently been framed, explained and justified as part of much a larger narrative of Jewish transition, emancipation and, ultimately, redemption via the adoption of Western, ostensibly liberal versions of modernity" (2018:4). A similar story of wilful migration to America, which is showcased as an act of redemption is the theme of these writings.

### **Refugee Selfhood and the Theme of 'Serial Migration' in Fiction**

The debates about identity, questions of nationhood and citizenship often imagine the self as something which is "always located in some sense in some place and cannot be totally unhoused" (Kaplan 2002:34). Diasporic experiences involving physical displacements from home are often understood as accompanied by selfhood divided between multiple locations. The violence, oppression and tyranny of the conception of the nation which led to the forced displacement of many South Asians, who transformed into refugees in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, are the themes of many fictional works in the last two decades. This can be seen as the ramifications of nation-building, which centred around an "excessive concern about the self that implies hostility towards the others" (Nag 2001: 4754). The representation of South Asian lived experiences in

Prajwal Parajuly's novel, and Bapsi Sidhwa's short story are explored to show how the protagonists' notions of selfhood and identity transform with regard to the countries of transit and reception while undergoing a series of migrations. Can the lives of those who were forcefully evicted from their places of origin be represented in the simple dichotomies of home/new country or belonging/displacement? Does the identity of refugees shaped by a discourse of 'otherness' concerning the places of their origin influence how the notion of 'home' appears in their experiences? The paper also explores how the works mentioned above represent the disruption of a located self and depict its impact on recognising the displacement of refugees from South Asia. Besides, the paper also investigates how these construct specific images of South Asia?

Prajwal Parajuly is an Indian author of Nepali ethnicity whose works focus primarily on the life and culture of the Nepali diaspora. His 2014 novel, *Land Where I Flee* which was shortlisted for the Dylan Thomas Prize is described as a 'homecoming novel'. The second text under discussion here is the Gujarati- Pakistani- Parsi- American writer Bapsi Sidhwa's short story "Defend Yourself Against Me" which appears in her collection titled *The Language of Love* (2014). It is a relatively long text of that genre that tells Mr Sikander Khan's story, who lived as a child refugee with the narrator (Joy's house in Pakistan's Lahore for a couple of years). Parajuly is often referred to as a South Asian writer. Whereas, Sidhwa is considered a South Asian Atlantic writer owing to the 'hyphenated identities' that constitute her identity as an author. Despite those differences, the common point of convergence between their texts discussed here is that both represent South Asians as the central characters and their depicted experiences of migration to America are also similar. The migrant characters in these works can be identified as 'political movers' as classified by Russell King and Chaido Karamoschou since

they “are onward migrating, self-evidently, for political reasons” (146). The experiences of displacement from their ‘home’ countries which make them political refugees in another South Asian country precede their arrival in North America. Bhagwati's character in Parajuly's novel had to live as a Bhutanese refugee in Nepal owing to ethnic conflict and Sikander, the central character of “Defend Yourself Against Me” had to find refuge in Lahore as a victim of violence during the Indo-Pak partition riots before reaching America. Moreover, their onward migration happens with an intention “to access more open, democratic and welcoming societies and to escape political, racist and religious repression in their first destination countries” (146). The sense of eternal displacement denotes their selfhoods since their image as ‘rivals’ or ‘enemies’ of their nations of origin lingers on and defines their subsequent life situations in each country.

The South Asian characters who appear in the texts that are analysed also appear to be in a double bind since their origins in a different part of the world continue to mark them as cultural 'outsiders' though the 'promise of America' is supposed to compensate for that crisis. Ruth Maxey observes that the South Asian Atlantic immigrants in USA and UK often find themselves in a double bind since the promise of social mobility and economic security offered by the new nation runs parallel to the white supremacist- racist discourses that mark various walks of the immigrant life experiences (Maxey 2012:4-5). Being different from the prominent migrant experiences that are emblematically portrayed as constituting the South Asian Atlantic experiences, the protagonists of both the texts under discussion, Sikander and Bhagwati do not fall under what is referred to by Christiane Schlote as the category of “privileged diasporics” or “clubbable cosmopolitans” (396). Yet, like many other serial migrants, they also “see migration as a kind of freedom in ways that might be taken as

contradicting the difficulties they have experienced” (Ossman 2004:117).

The case of serial migrants is a departure from an unchanging conceptualisation of the self since they “do not have a stable institutional or national reference point that makes sense of their displacements”(Ossman 2004:112). The lived experiences of South Asian political refugees who migrated to the USA in the latter half of the 20th century as represented in the Anglophone fiction of the recent times show this. Despite being a short story, the shifting of localities is a characteristic feature of Sidhwa’s writing which describes a constant movement between America and Pakistan. In contrast to this, Parajuly's novel doesn't provide a detailed geographical description of any space outside the Indian subcontinent other than a few instances in the beginning. Yet, from the references given in the novel about Bhagwati and her family's life and travels, one can make out the diversity of spaces that have constituted their selfhoods. Despite having multiple identities and cultural affiliations, Bhagwati and Sikander's identity as US citizens is projected as the more prominent and comparatively stable one that defines the lives of these migrants in these fictional works. This foregrounding of the ‘virtues of America’ which appear in the fiction of Parajuly and Sidhwa is achieved through certain character sketches and specific sequences of events in the plot.

### **Egalitarian America vs. the Chaotic Homeland**

Parajuly’s *Land Where I Flee* revolves around four siblings' homecoming to Gangtok in Sikkim for the *Chaurasi* or the 84<sup>th</sup> birthday of their grandma. The incidents that follow the get-together unravel the family secrets and tell the readers about how the lives of the grandma, her two grandsons, and two granddaughters have changed over the years. It also shows the reader how each grandchild's feelings for their siblings and the

relationship they had with their grandma have changed drastically over the years. The character Bhagwati, one among the four siblings in this novel is introduced as “a refugee who lives in America with a shiny green card that would probably never land her a job commensurate with her expectations” (Parajuly 2014:18). Being born into a family of Sikkimese – Nepalimixed ethnic heritage, she belonged nowhere. Later, her identity as a Nepali-speaking Indian married to Ram, a Nepali-speaking Bhutanese Damaai (lower caste Hindu) complicates matters further. Her ties with her family and grandma were broken since she eloped with Ram, a lower caste journalist from Bhutan and things worsened after that. The novel throws light on the notions of ‘home’ and ‘nation’ as political and cultural ideas by tracing the series of migrations that the character Bhagwati undertakes. Soon after her marriage, “she and other Nepali speaking Bhutanese were herded out of Bhutan because they weren’t Bhutanese enough to be Bhutanese” (17).

The political history of Bhutan tells us that the fictional incident mentioned here refers to those policies of the Bhutanese monarchy in the 1990s “which aimed at consolidating national integrity, Drukpa culture, values, and Buddhist ideology at the expense of the cultural and ethnic identity of other groups” (Ikram 2005:105). Bhutan had a long history of migration from Nepal and India since the 19<sup>th</sup> century British colonial times. “As a result of this migratory process, Bhutan came to be composed of two major ethnic groups—Drukpas and Lhotshampas” (Ghosh 2016: 22). Bhutan had a policy of inter-ethnic assimilation till the late 1980s, after which it not only “made the citizenship laws stricter, but also tried to streamline the Bhutanese people on the lines of Drukpa cultural norms” (23). As a result of the changed citizenship laws and the favour towards the Drukpa cultural norms, Lhotshampas were forced to leave Bhutan to

find shelter in Nepal (23). In *Land Where I Flee*, the husband of Bhagwati belongs to the Nepali-speaking Dalit caste of Damaai, who had to flee from Bhutan with his family as a consequence of this. Though Bhagwati's family finds refuge in Nepal for a while, her husband's "ancestors had been gone from Nepal and been in Bhutan for too long for them to be Nepalese" (Parajuly 2014:17). The 'real Nepalese' outside the refugee camps detested them as "*saranarthis* whose desperation had attracted enough Western attention for countries like America to come to their rescue" (17-18). Bhagwati acquires new identities during her post-marriage migrations, and each of these adds a new layer to her selfhood. Her transformation from a Sikkimese-Nepali Bahun (Brahmin) to a Damaai followed by the statuses of a refugee working-class parent in Nepal, and a permanent resident in the US leaves her with a floating identity of non-belongingness to any place or any community. The sense of psychological homelessness Bhagwati holds runs through the novel, and it is also accompanied by a longing to reunite with her family in the ancestral homeland. She also understands that returning to any of the earlier locations in South Asia is impossible due to her status as an 'outcaste' in her ancestral family and her present family's status as *saranarthis* or refugees in Nepal and as ethnic outsiders in Bhutan. Sajal Nag observes that "While building homes for the self, nations have often rendered others homeless" (4754). Not only does the nation-state but also the hegemonic practices of caste, leave Bhagwati and her family homeless and stateless. Therefore, she occupies an identity marked by perpetual othering in all the locations she has lived. Hence, the impossibility of tracing a 'home' of the past that leaves the refugee with the relative security of legal citizenship in America becomes central to Parajuly's novel.

Bhagwati also goes through experiences which push her into feelings of perpetual homelessness in the US since

Americanness has been “largely associated with whiteness and racism continues to impact in multiple ways on Americans of colour” (Maxey 2012:29). Though she is portrayed as the victim of racist remarks and sexual harassment in her workplace in the US, it is hinted that a new kind of confidence sprouted in her after migrating to America. It gives her the courage to open new lines of communication with her grandma and her siblings, after a decade of elopement from her family and hometown. She is hopeful that, “Now that she was in the golden land, her grandma wouldn’t question if any of her calls were motivated by financial difficulties” (Parajuly 2014:62). Thus, her American citizenship is projected as a solution for all the hardships accumulated in her life because of other socio-cultural affiliations in the past. A home that is lost forever, one which exists only in her memories, leads to a continued sense of displacement in Bhagwati. This results in the development of a sense of admiration for America in her mind. Thus, a desire to assimilate or re-root in a new land accompanies the sense of uprootedness. Ossman observes that, during a series of migrations, the migrant is “led to develop a kind of implicit comparative social study. Her comparisons of bureaucracies, social norms, and political systems move beyond simple contrasts of the new country’s ways with those she knew at home” (113).

Bapsi Sidhwa's short story “Defend Yourself Against Me”, shows the transformation of its central character Sikander from a helpless child refugee in Pakistan into an adult immigrant in the US. When Joy, an Anglican Protestant, originally from Lahore, unexpectedly meets Sikander at a social gathering at an Indian friend's house in the US, it triggers a “fierce bout of nostalgia” and a “host of ghost-memories” in her (Sidhwa 2014:214). The text throws light on the events during the Indo-Pak partition after the collapse of the British Empire and the ethnic cleansing and chaos that followed it.

There were three partitions in 1947-of British India and of the provinces of Bengal and Punjab-that created the new nation-states of India and a spatially fragmented West and East Pakistan. It engendered the most extensive recorded population transfer in history amidst horrific mass violence (Roy 2012:5).

The transition of erstwhile colonial subjects into national citizens after partition was accompanied by the drawing of national boundaries and a series of communal riots and the creation of categories like refugees, displaced persons, evacuees, infiltrators etc., which is central to the narrative of this text. The character Sikander Khan and his family are shown in the story as victims of the partition violence, and they have to flee from the post-partition Punjab on the Indian side to Pakistan since they are Muslims.

The childhood experiences of violence in India that Sikander had gone through and the following years of his painful life as a refugee in Pakistan are presented through the memories of Joy who was also a child at that point. Despite her seemingly secure life in Pakistan during the partition, she witnessed the pains of other victims around her that left the images of a tragic past about her homeland. When their Hindu neighbours fled, leaving behind their enormous bungalow, Sikander and a few others fled from India to find refuge in one of the "two gargantuan refugee camps...set up on the outskirts of Lahore," (Sidhwa 2014:215) became the new neighbours for the narrator's family. Sikhs had attacked Sikander's house in Punjab in India, his mother was raped, and everyone else in his mother's family had gotten killed. The identity of Sikander that is recollected by the narrator is that of a child who is homeless and destitute and one who is displaced and stateless. When nations try to define themselves as homogenous groups, "a search of commonalities often led to exclusivity and insularity;

it terminates cultural ex-changes and views every group outside the exclusivity as the other” (Nag, 2001, p:47-54). She meets Sikander in the liminal spaces of Lahore that is left vacant through such an act of exclusivity. His family replaces the erstwhile legal residents in young Joy’s neighbourhood who fled Lahore since they no longer belonged to the newly formed nation- Pakistan, owing to their Hindu identity. Referring to the personal narratives of women in the aftermath of the Indo-Pak partition, Veena Das comments that, “fleeing to another alien space led to a division of the self and the world according to a logic that made the self radically fugitive and the world radically fragmented” (Das 1991: 65). The narrator who meets Sikander later as a transformed adult in a different country finds it difficult to identify him as the same child whom she knew years ago in Pakistan. Her observation about the adult she tries to reconnect with is as follows: "Sikander Khan moves closer to me. He is completely at ease. Acclimatized. Americanized" (Sidhwa 2014: 210). During his meeting with Joy, who knew him as a helpless refugee in her neighbourhood, Sikander surprises her with his nonchalant attitude, and she reads the lack of embarrassment on his part as resulting from the confidence gained by him through his acculturation with the American lifestyle.

Instead of the dichotomy of home/displacement, both the novel and the short story offer us a picture of America as an alternative democratic space in contrast to the impossibility of a home/nation that would readily accommodate the expelled refugees or somebody who has a queer identity. During their return to India from the USA after a long gap, Agastayain Parajuly’s novel is shown to be surprised to notice that neither Bhagwati’s clothes nor her bags were so different from his. It is similar to the narrator's feelings in Sidhwa's story about meeting Mr Khan in America after many years. An implicit tone of Americanophilia runs through such accounts of

comparison in Parajuly's novel, which appears in the words and deeds of the character Bhagwati and is also replicated in the characterisation of her brother. Agastaya, an America-returned doctor finds it difficult to hide his gay identity back home. Holding a mirror on Agastaya's thoughts, Parajuly writes, "That was the beauty of America- in a strange way, it brought everyone to the same level...sort of the way they, an America- returned doctor and an America- returned refugee, did right now. In America, with its jeans and T-shirt egalitarianism, everyone was uniform" (53). Refugee selfhoods, with cultural and national identities that were re-imagined multiple times, since they had to flee from their homelands to other neighbouring countries where they remained misfits, are portrayed in both the works. Neither of them tries to recognise their past selves concerning their long-lost home since the idea of a located self gets disrupted through a series of displacements and evictions. According to Maxey, the synecdoche of home in the works of many migrant South Asian writers "is used both to affirm and to call into question the status of Britain and America as sites of the permanent settlement" (29).

The novel tries to contrast the seemingly egalitarian and liberal society of the US and the hierarchal and conservative Indian society by throwing light on Agastaya's struggles. Agastaya's anxieties about hiding his queer identity from his family members are depicted as something he never had to face in the US. When Bhagwati complains about the diminishing Nepali skills of her American bred children during one such phone conversations, her conservative grandma leaves her in dismay by referring to their mixed and non-Brahmin lineage by responding thus, "Oh, I forget they aren't Baahuns. Caste less. Language-less- all the same!" (Parajuly 2014:63). Bhagwati's children who have been assimilated into the American monocultural identity and her grandma, who represents a

bygone generation of the elite feudal class in India, are portrayed in stark contrast to each other. Unlike her kids who are brought up in the melting pot model of cultural homogeneity, Bhagwati's grandma becomes the representative of a hierarchal world seeped in the adversity of languages and castes, where each linguistic or caste category is a strong marker that defines one's identity, exclusion or belongingness to a group.

Similarly, India and Pakistan become sites of communal riots where women's bodies are violated, and kids live with physical and mental scars of violence as is recollected through Joy and Mrs Sikander's narratives. The incidents related to the drawing of new boundaries after the partition of India and Pakistan is shown to have made deep imprints in the subconscious mind of the narrator-Joy too, in her childhood. Sidhwa depicts the thoughts of the narrator, in these words, "I have not recalled this part of my childhood in years. Certainly not since I moved to the smoothly operating country of my adoption" (Sidhwa 2014:12). Similar to Bhagwati's experiences, the recollections of her painful past in Pakistan which flashes anew in Joy's mind are contrasted with the safety and social security that she feels as an adult in the first world country where she has migrated to. The get-together at the Indian friend's house referred to as the 'Indian bric-a-brac' by the narrator also points out the 'chaotic' nature of the South Asian demeanour itself. It is gibberish in multiple South Asian tongues which makes her recall her poignant childhood days in Pakistan amidst her more sophisticated life in the US (211-12). These parallel representations of homes of the past and the present are included to validate or favour America as a nation/ home over India, Pakistan, Nepal or Bhutan which expelled or marginalised the refugees in the fictional works. While Parajuly's novel mentions the racial discrimination faced by the protagonists in America, Sidhwa's fiction is completely

silent about the hierarchies that may be at work in the new land.

### **The Transformation from Refugee in South Asia to American Citizen**

Haimanti Roy observes that “Migration from one territorial unit to another, even if temporary’, defined one’s nationality; it signalled the intent of acquiring new citizenship” (4). Bhagwati’s American citizenship is understood as an empowering identity in her life in contrast to the restrictions posed by the gender norms in a Sikkimese-Nepalese family, or the inferior socio-political status that was stamped on her as the wife of a Nepali Damaai in Bhutan. Acquiring US citizenship is not only an act of gaining new rights in her case. It entails her belongingness to a nation and a ‘home’ that she never possessed. Ketu H. Katrak observes that in the case of a migrant, “Not belonging, being an outsider, can be part of a privilege that is possible for those who can afford monetarily to go back and forth” (131). Unlike many of the privileged migrants who may feel at a loss as an ‘outsider’ in a new country or become overwhelmed by nostalgia for ‘home’, Bhagwati finds her new identity in America, a relief from her perpetual status of a refugee. In her first conversation with her grandma over the phone, Bhagwati wants to flaunt her new identity as an American citizen by emphasising that the government takes very good care of them there (Parajuly 2014: 63) and it is hinted at when Agastaya notices that “she spoke more in English than in Nepali” (52) during his first meeting with her after many years. Meena Alexander states that how one comes to terms with a language in a new land is related to one’s identity, since “learning a particular language can determine one’s sense of belonging or of being “unhoused” (Alexander quoted in Katrak 1996:132). Though, finding refuge in America doesn’t help Bhagwati come out of the post-

marriage status of an 'outcaste' and caste continues to stand as a blockade in the re-building of her relationship with her grandma, she has acquired the confidence that she will find some job for sustenance in America with her minimal English-speaking skills. The novel also shows that her husband Ram's siblings, who had distanced themselves earlier from him, began to contact him to figure out a way for them to reach America. The narratives of refugees like Ram's family impact their relatives in Nepal since it runs in community circles similar to the migrant narratives of the Jews in America. Ury observes that "many Jews end up imagining and constituting themselves...as the victims of wanton, hate-filled violence in Eastern Europe who were saved by the particularly prescient decision to 'Go West'" (2). The novel records that their marginality derived from their identity as lower caste Hindus and as Nepali refugees from Bhutan are compelling reasons behind the Americanophilia of Ram's siblings.

They were like others who assumed that with a quick flight to the West, your troubles stayed behind in the East: the East is poor, the West is rich; the East is a disparity, the West is equality; the East is problems, the West is the solution to these problems (Parajuly 2014:65).

In the case of Nepali refugees in Bhutan, the international law for refugees offers a 'resettlement option in a third state' that allows the refugee to "automatically acquire the permanent status of the economic migrant in that country" (Ikram 2005:115). Therefore, the refugees are often attracted to the promise of socio-economic security that is expected from an opportunity to migrate to the US. Similarly, Sikander and his mother (Ammijee), who were the victims of Sikh violence during the partition, have relegated their past life full of traumatic events after their migration to America. Their

eviction from their roots in British India and subsequent migration to Pakistan is the result of the creation of new nations which “requires constant shedding of people who do not fit the constructed identity or question the framework” (Nag 2001:4759). Their vulnerability as victims of violence in relation to the Sikhs in India and as refugees with regard to the lawful residents of Lahore has resulted in their fractured selfhoods in the past. Interestingly, they are able to restore normal lives as survivors who occupy equal grounds with both these groups of people in America where all of them interact with each other as members of the South Asian American Diaspora. Not only does this American citizenship endow them with equal rights and privileges, but it also gives them a chance to forget their painful pasts in a distant land. It is also suggested that the splendour of American life has helped Joy move on in life without being stuck in her painful childhood memories. Her inner thoughts are revealed to us as: “Too enamoured by the dazzling shopping malls and technical opulence of the USA, too frequent a visitor to Pakistan, I have not yet missed it, or given thought to the past” (Sidhwa 2014: 212).

In addition to the first-person accounts that describe the protagonists' lives as refugees in another neighbouring country in Pararjuly's and Sidhwa's fiction, the third person point of view of the political crises that made them refugees during the early part of their lives is also included in these texts. Interestingly, this is also brought about in both the texts through the presence of a character, 'a privileged migrant' in the US. The references to Bhagwati's past life are made in *Land Where I Flee* by reflecting on Agastaya's thoughts about her and Sikandar's plight as children refugees unfurls to us in the short story through the memories of the narrator Joy. The narratorial voices of privileged migrants introduced in these works are emblematic of the authors' identity in the respective

fictional works. With its splendour and projected egalitarianism, North America becomes a land of redemption and a haven for the hapless South Asian refugees while viewed through this narratorial lens. Despite such parallels, there are many features which make these texts differ from one another. Parajuly's novel doesn't give a detailed description of Bhagwati's refugee experiences in Bhutan or Nepal and also mentions the racist and sexist treatments meted out to her in her workplace. In contrast, Sidhwa's fiction delves into the details of political unrest and violence in the Indian subcontinent following the partition. It vividly portrays the plight of these political refugees through the life of Sikander. Their life in America is shown as a complete escape from these.

### **America and the Road to Resilience**

While South Asia is portrayed as a territory marked by ethnic cleansing, persecution and communal tensions, the transformation in the lives of characters as depicted in "Defend Yourself Against Me," defines North America as the path to redemption and resilience. Bhagwati and Sikander's physical appearances in America do not fit the detailed image that helpless refugees are given in both works of fiction. Joy recalls images of the child refugee in Pakistan with his 'sun-charred little body covered with scabs and wounds' which made the narrator feel sorry for Sikander in Sidhwa's story. This had also created a repulsive reaction in her. In contrast, the blue-suited and black-booted Mr Sikander Khan, whom she meets years later in America, is a completely transformed man. The narrator, initially, was doubtful about his identity since the mark of the deep wound on his head is not visible since he is wearing a wig. As opposed to the images of an orphaned child which stays afresh in her memories, Sikander is accompanied by his wife and three sisters in salwar-kameezes, wearing

heavy gold jewellery with a few small kids running around them (Sidhwa 2014: 214-18). It is implied that though Pakistan couldn't offer much to the child refugee from India's Punjab, America could make good from his losses by gifting him with wealth, family and friendship. Like the one on his head, the wounds of his past life are also invisible to an onlooker since it is concealed from public view. Agastaya is also amazed by Bhagwati's outfit and her confident demeanour as an American when they meet each other after many years.

The presence of Joanne, the white wife of Joy's friend Vijay in the get-together, is also worth mentioning. She is depicted as an outsider who is ignorant of South Asian histories of violence and communal tensions. Hence, she is the first person who comes up with the idea that there is the possibility of marriage between Mrs Khan's widowed sister and Khushwant Singh, who is their common friend (230). While the narrator herself is unsure about this idea since she knew that members of the Sikh community were also complicit in the tragedy of Khans and other Muslim refugees who fled to Pakistan from India, Joanne expresses her confidence that all past rivalries of South Asians will disappear in this new land. She says, "Let's give it a try, Joy. Don't you think they are too civilised to go around killing each other - at least in America?" (231). Joanne's comments about the young South Asians in America reveal her belief that America, as a 'civilising space', can redeem these members of rivalrous South Asian communities. The story underlines the impact of American life as a catalyst of resilience in the life of Sikander, when it closes with the narrator's affirmation, "Joanne is right: living in America changes people - I can see the changes in myself...yes..." (248). Maxey's observation about South Asian Atlantic writers that, "Some writers even display a kind of proselytising zeal about emigration: part of a broader justification, perhaps, for leaving the ancestral homeland in favour of the US or UK"

(28) is befitting to explain Sidhwa's illustration of America in this story, i.e. as a land of redemption and reconciliation.

Sikander's mother who followed her son to America is also shown to be finding refuge by abandoning the lands where she was raped; her family was killed, and where she lived in a state of homelessness and despair for many years. The narrator is shown to be surprised in her meetings with both these victims of violence. To her surprise, the narrator also finds in Sikander's Ammiji, just another open, acquiescent, hospitable face of a peasant woman who is happy to visit her son and greet his friends when she meets them. She can't make the connections between the 'gentle, contented, woman in homespun clothes' whom she meets in the US and the woman who was "kidnapped, raped, and sold in India" (241). The resilience of the transformed selves she meets in a different continent, after a long interval from their meeting in Lahore, moves Joy. Sikander's calm and cheerful demeanour and his mother's narrative about how she forgave all the Sikhs during the dramatic incident in which the young Sikh guys in the story apologise for the sins done to the Khans by their ancestors in the past, surprise Joy more than anything. Overall, migration to America is shown as a fair opportunity for all of them to warrant a final escape from the trauma and pain they suffered in their home countries and as an entry to a new world of possibilities and hope.

## **Conclusion**

Parajuly's and Sidhwa's works describe the processes by which immigrants establish and maintain social relations that link together their societies of origin and the new ones where they settle down with 'dual lives'. The refugee experiences in a neighbouring South Asian country to which the characters of these fictional works escape are the years of hardships in their lives amounting to the unpleasant memories they wish to

forget in the latter part of their lives. The theme of serial migration in these fictional works acts as a tool to compare South Asian polities and America as a politico-cultural space. In both the literary works, the fears of homelessness as an exile or refugee life appear aggravated after escaping to a neighbouring nation in the subcontinent. The refugees who elope from their home countries to escape discrimination based on ethnicity and religion are indicated to be suffering more in these neighbouring nations. Simultaneously, the second migration in the series of movements that brings them to North America is projected as giving way to moments of resilience, relief, and redemption. Unlike any privileged migrant, these refugees, who fled from their countries of origin can't think about returning to the comfort of a 'home' since it is non-existent as a physical space due to violence or political turmoil. It is also lost in the psychological sense since their identities as internal 'others' within the nation had led to their expulsion from the notion of national subjects. A series of migrations over time and the new layers of identities taken up by the refugees across different places make it impossible for them to return to any idea of a 'located self at home'. The simple binaries of a located self at home/ displaced self in an alien land are insufficient to describe the selfhoods and experiences of serial migrants for whom perpetual homelessness owing to a marginal status in each nation becomes the norm. Rather than feeling displaced in North America, they appear to find an opportunity for survival in the new land. As a result, a set of binaries are employed in these narratives to describe the experiences of serial migrants as they are felt by the protagonists: East/West, space of inter-ethnic conflict/land of refuge. The images of America as the land of modernity and redemption favourable for the survival of the refugees and marginal groups against the hierarchal and conservative societies of South Asian polities that evicted them are offered

through the comparative framework of serial migrant experiences of the protagonists.

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