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Identity Issues of Asian Indian American Women in the Diaspora

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Abstract

This ethnographic study investigates the identity formation of immigrant women in the diaspora and discusses the implications of transnational migration that run parallel to the demands of deconstructing and reconstructing personal identity issues. It probes how resilient individuals can be in the face of adversity, and none other is more prominently evident as in the uprooting of an individual from one's own country. Other factors that might contribute are the past and present economic status, the dynamics of culture and social milieu to fit-in with the culture and social norms of the new host country. Findings revealed that in this immigrant American society, all that the immigrant Indian American women are asking is for society to cast another glance at them, and see that they have forged for themselves a different identity, not just a marginalized minority or a 'woman of color' vying for jobs with the existing members of the majority.

Introduction

In the contemporary globalized world, this study investigates the identity formation of immigrant Indian women in the diaspora. It discusses the implications of diasporic global migration that run parallel to the demands of deconstructing and reconstructing personal identity issues. The term "immigrant" refers to individuals living in the United States, who were not U.S. citizens at birth and necessarily includes all individuals that trace their ancestry to a country outside the United States (SAALT 2016), in this case, Asian Indians. Indians now comprise the largest segment of the South Asian immigrant community, making up over 80% of the Asian American population. Between 2000 and 2010, the South Asian American population became the fastest growing major immigrant ethnic group in the United States. Women accompanied their husbands and out of that, many were professionally qualified, while many women came on their own as students or professionals.

The purpose of this ethnographic research was to examine the identity formation of immigrant women in the diaspora. It attempts to understand how the process of immigration has changed the life's trajectory of the Asian Indian women in the United States, analyzes personal identity issues, and tries to interpret their lives from the data gathered to draw inferences. This study discusses whether their hyphenated Asian-Indian- American identity is shaped by factors that they encountered during the

immigration process and the diaspora, or were they the values they inculcated before immigration. Is the resilience that they developed due to the human and educational capital that they accrued in their homeland? Given the dimensions of human diversity, how do these women deal with the interface between societal norms in relation to global adaptation, and how do they negotiate with the preconceptions of the host society and analyzes how they contend with the newly constructed identity.

Conducted in 2018/2019, this ethnographic study explores the narratives and practices in the daily lives of these women, and analyzes the immigrant identity experiences and constructions within the narrative of the social, educational, financial and cultural capital of women who have immigrated to the United States from India. In this narrative, twenty-one women of Asian Indian descent from the Bay area in California and the suburbs of New York have decided to articulate their life's stories, allowing us glimpses into their lives and thoughts. These women described their experiences as affecting several facets of their lives ranging from further studies, a quest for a career, assimilating and adjusting to American society, and explanations of their lives such as arranged marriages, and relationships within the family. Based within the context of ethnographic research interviews, the analysis focuses on how the women narrators construct and re-construct their identities as they communicate their stories concerning their lives into the newly found society. An extensive analysis of their identity constructions essentially necessitates a close exploration of the socio-economic domains within the context in which these narratives are situated. Hence, these socio-cultural worlds are analyzed to see the connection between the narratives and their identity construction.

This study further tries to discover how these issues regarding the multiple, sometimes fractured and hyphenated identity and the all-pervading questions of 'Am I Indian', 'Am I American' or 'Am I Both' and 'In what way am I both' are experienced and enunciated by Asian Indian women.

Literature review

Post 1965, the immigration process to the United States consisted mostly of men but then their women and children followed. As of 2015, there has been a substantial growth in the Indian population in the United States with 2.4 million Indian resident immigrants (Zong, & Batalova, (2017). In her study, Das (2012) indicated that the arrival of Asian Indian women were under different conditions. The economic prosperity of the Indian American community has been deliberated upon however, the history of immigrants from India as a collective group with socio-cultural issues have not been discussed. While the financial and political history of immigration from India is replete with stories of professionals and entrepreneurs who migrated, women's issues were not prominent. History was pulsating with his stories, but her stories were never told. There is no reference either about their coping mechanisms in the alien socio-cultural milieu that they found themselves in, or of the educational achievements and professional skills. In this study, the tales articulated by these Asian Indian immigrant women chronicle the way they chose to rise beyond the initial experiences to charter their own paths.

To find out the real reasons for migration, the researcher needs to find the individual voices of the respondents: the Indian immigrant women, who travelled miles to come to a new country and adopt it as their own. These voices might be subdued from social, cultural, economic and other compulsions and complexities in their lives, but need to be heard. For these immigrant women, the validity and authenticity of their homeland, and their very existence arises when inquiries like 'where are you from' questions the legitimacy of their foundation, in a sense, implying rootlessness. According to Mehta (2009) this might result in a loss of self-assurance and self-confidence for the immigrant women, coupled with the fear of never replying adequately. South Asian women immigrants have always faced the persistent question regarding the identification, definition and clarification of their characteristics and attributes. Some women declare themselves as both Indian and American, but this is a recurrent theme and along with the relentless questioning of her identity and homeland, leads her to question her own self. Bhatia (2007) contends that in the period following the initial immigration of professionals to the United States, the first generation, qualified, middle-class Indians transformed into "people of color". He argues that the larger majority culture uses stereotypical terms, labels, and categories to define and frame the identity of the Indian migrants as 'other', while in reality, Indians have deftly negotiated the terms and conditions under which issues related to diversity and differences come up and counter these labels of 'otherness'. In her study on Indian immigrant women, Banerjee (2009) reveals how differences in social and cultural backgrounds influenced those regarding ideas of emancipation, liberation and how they perceived American women. Kapur (2010) argues that in terms of influence, immigrant women will play an equal role as men in the political and economic landscape of the next fifty years. Although the extent of that influence will vary based on factors such as demographics, technologies, economic structures, domestic politics, institutional structures, and national security concerns, their influence will have a profound and transformative impact.

Other factors that might contribute are her past and present economic status, the dynamics of culture and social milieu to fit-in with the culture and social norms of the new host country. Many of these women negotiate their very fragile existence and develop a robust identity. Finding one's own identity and reconciliation of self to try to fit the identity is one of the foremost quests of the immigrant women in the new country. Reconstructing and negotiating their identity has been the main impediment for the progress of the Indian American immigrant women, comments Das, (2012). Mehta's (2009) study also stresses the multiple issues in the assimilation of Asian Indians in the American culture.

Methodology

Surveys, focus group interviews, and twenty-one individual interviews and narratives formed the basis of this investigation. At the initial stage, it started with the survey questions followed by a detailed analysis of how they came to be where they are at this junction in their life. Real stories emerged, which were exclusive, sometimes resonating, and at times, unique. Enunciated in the personal for as stories, they revealed a treasure trove of rich data. The researcher is an Asian Indian woman in the Diaspora and hence, aware that the subjective stance as a researcher has blended

with the objective factual circumstance. Not a bystander in the study, the researcher is sensitive to the responsibilities of conducting such a study. Ethnography is the art of describing a group or culture. This study was conducted in an ethnographic manner, and hence, required participant observation on the part of the researcher to collect data. As an ethnographer and participant observer, the researcher had to delve deep into the psyche of the women in the community to explore their core beliefs, their usage of language, cultural notions and the subsequent changes in their behavior or perceptions as they found themselves in a transformed context. Ethnography is inward looking, aiming to uncover the tacit knowledge of culture participants. The interaction with the women interviewed contributed to learning more about the cultural nuances of the hyphenated Asian-Indian–American community, and the researcher’s subjective prejudice is to be considered even as the women are studied. The researcher felt that as the cases emerge, each different in their own opinions, expressions, and declarations; their representation should be chronicled, in their own voices.

Through a triangulation of data sources: survey, case histories, and interviews, the intention was to capture the portraits of the Asian Indian immigrant women. Their interviews were then transcribed, interpreted and the findings were examined from a cultural perspective. This was a purposive sampling as the women were mostly educated and some of them had professional careers. The time elapsed from the time that they had migrated from India to the United States ranged from twelve to twenty-four years. The age range was between thirty-five to sixty years. This article conveys only the findings, as the narrations could not be included.

Results and Discussions

Five representative voices of the women interviewed are mentioned here. They are Soha, Sarini, Rhea, Nita and Sonia. Soha, a teacher in California, is at one end of the spectrum, where she came to the United States as a young bride with a high school degree, and completed her education with the help of grants. She conveyed that at times, she suffered from a psychosis of fear fueled by uncertainty in a distant land, but her endurance level has increased over the years, and she has learned to navigate it at her own pace. Rhea was at the other end of the spectrum, a medical graduate from a prestigious university in India, had worked a few years as a doctor in a hospital in San Francisco, and now has her own clinic, clearly successful in establishing a career of her own. Sarini, who hails from New York deemed the home and family to be the primary responsibility of the woman, and initially remained as a homemaker. Over the years, Sarini deftly adopted multiple identities to withstand the effects of social ineptitude both at home and in society. She has not faced overt forms of discrimination, but covert ones in many instances, but she noted that one could overcome those by adopting different strategies. Of all the interviewees, she stood out as the most comfortable one in terms of adapting to whatever situation that she is placed in, exhibiting the strength of her personal agency.

A common theme that appeared was that the women in the study attributed their achievement to the family and the socio-cultural value systems with which they grew up. One of the vital and overriding factors that came out in the life of the Indian women

in India was the preservation and perpetuation of traditional value and culture of the community, mainly by and through women, almost as if they were the guardians of heritage and legacy. The narrations revealed that the respondents tend to re-imagine and relive memories of the homeland, now blurred with time, and comprehensible concepts of the place and events that they left behind are now imprecise and somewhat distorted.

While de-constructing, reconstructing and negotiating their new identity, the twenty-one women interviewed saw themselves as professional Indian-Americans as their primary identities and then as immigrants. However, these identities were construed based on their own experiences in the diasporic phenomenon, and dynamically re-interpreted repeatedly, resulting in multiple, fractured, hyphenated identities. The identities of these immigrant women were perceived as contradictory or inconsistent based on their temporal and spatial existences. These women, deep down in their psyche, were cognizant of the changes that are occurring, and developed multiple identities and flexibility as a mode of survival, and as immigrants, they accepted or rejected the different identities in diverse contexts as the necessity demanded. Contradictory views about these women exist as the dominant society stereotypes these women as smart, articulate, knowledgeable, well educated, well versed in the classics and the muses, techno-savvy, progressive, liberal, and yet as 'minorities', and, in many cases, are not ready to accept them into the dominant society. It results in a constant struggle for them to assimilate and adapt to the cultural and normative values that the American society lives by. On the other hand, their own smaller ethnic community desires them to perpetuate, preserve and disseminate those values that they had landed with, many years ago. It creates a schism between the 'progressive' and the 'traditional' Indian, a constant tussle, a pull and push effect that affects the lives of women. These women have to undergo powerful transformations in the diasporic process, acculturating, adapting and assimilating as the circumstances necessitate. Bhatia (2007) puts forth a differing view, which argues that Asian Indian Americans are no more the marginalized minorities of yesteryears. They have now created an identity for themselves that goes beyond those descriptive adjectives. New American Dimensions and Inter Trend Communications. (2009) concurs that taken as a whole, there are indications that Indian Americans have been able to adjust to life in the U.S. and become comfortable there, as many women found the immigrant experience liberating, because America is a land of equal opportunity, offering more choices for women. However, many respondents mention that they miss the community bonding and family values in India. While navigating in America's individualistic culture, some feel the de-emphasis on friends and family makes the transition rough. Many mention that although they may emphasize the American part of their identities, they engage in a balancing act of identity.

One factor that stood them in good stead was their sound education. A proficiency in the English language was one of the attributes prominent in the lives of these respondents, as most of the professional women exhibited a high level of fluency in the English language. Bhatia's (2007) study also reiterates that most professional urban Indian women who immigrated to the United States have attended "English

medium” or ‘Convent schools” and are fluent speakers and writers of English. Education shapes the dimensions of the human capital of women and contributes to the restructuring of their identities, facilitating the process of adaptation and their resilience.

The Color Palette

Negotiating the color palette’ has been one of the many hurdles facing the immigrant Asian Indian women. Non-white women have been distinguished from women of European ethnicity by using the term ‘woman of color’ in the United States. Asian Indians have also been included in this category. Society prefers to categorize people and ascribe to them certain characteristics, behaviors and norms, which might/ might not be different from their own. It is then easy to classify and stereotype these groups or individuals as it is easy to read the labels and presume that all individuals in that category who are subsumed under that umbrella term will behave and cognitively process and act in that expected way. This process implies there is no cognitive flexibility accorded to individuals of that group; that everyone in that group is homogeneous in terms of ideas and ideology, values and principles, and that the lives of all these individuals run along a well-constructed path following the same pattern. Sonia remarked: I did not realize that ‘I am a woman of color’ before I came to the United States. In India, we are all the same color, maybe different shades, and generally, people are not discriminated because of ‘color’. One does not have high or low status because one is dark or fair, and it (color) does not signify that you are different, or belong to the minority sector. When I came here to the United States for the first time I found out that I am also the ‘other’, as I am darker skinned than the Caucasians. Although I am much better educated than most of them, albeit with the highest terminal degree (Ph.D.) that only 1% of White Americans have, I am still deemed a ‘minority’. Thus my choice of my own ‘identity’ is also ‘colored’ by my perspective of the American society, and so I have learned and continue to look at society through my ‘colored lenses’, though I might choose not to do so. Thus, my own sense of self attributes to my own Identity formation.

Nita’s (a college professor) remarks were poignant: “I suppose that like other Indians who reside in the US, I too have a contested self and identity. I have an identity that has been challenged and questioned over and over again, and am only now coming to terms with the self (personality, nature, character of who I am) that I have negotiated for myself in my own space. In India, I had an identity of my own and was quite happy with it. In The United States, I have to find one again anew. Fitting in with the American community of neighbors, colleagues and students as well as keeping my Indian heritage and ethnicity with its different values is quite a difficult task. Questions that arise in my mind vary: To what extent can one assimilate while retaining one’s own individuality? Conformation to the existing norms of the society that I now find myself in is what I struggle to do every day, while I try not to erase those memories of my homeland and my ethnic roots and hold on to my very existence. On weekdays I am a professional Indian-American, while on weekends, I am a full-fledged Indian, draped in a colorful saree and singing the Bengali songs and music, savoring the sweet treats that I grew up with. I have a mixed family here in the United States, so I celebrate Christmas and

Hanukkah with equal gusto that I celebrate Diwali (The Indian celebration called “The Festival of Lights”).

These women were born and raised in families in different parts of India, and they adhere to cultural values and social traditions, which have their origins in differing states of India. India is comprised of different states and the diverse communities are as disparate as different countries, and furthermore, these women hail from diverse racial and ethnocentric groups in India. They speak different languages, have different cuisine and culture and in many cases, their religion might be different. However, as immigrants in the United States, they are homogenized as a conglomerate whole, and are subsumed as part of a larger group, as Asian Indians or even referred to as Indian Americans.

One of the dominant factors that emerged during the conversations with the women is the preservation of traditional value and culture of the community. The tradition is to be perpetuated by women almost as if they were the guardians of heritage, and are instrumental in transmitting the values to the next generation. In addition, modern times and fiscal conditions at home demand that they pursue a career and contribute to the budget of the family, which implies that they are constantly trying to maintain a balance.

New American Dimensions and Inter Trend Communications. (2009) concurs that taken as a whole, there are indications that Indian Americans have been able to adjust to life in the U.S. and become comfortable there. Their ability to adjust may have been facilitated by several aspects, notable among which is the use of English and exposure to other aspects of Western society while growing up in India, a country with strong historical ties to Britain. Language proficiency and cultural exposure have been major obstacles for many first generation immigrants of other ethnicities in United States. The other factor is the value of workplace skills, which may lead to a feeling of self-esteem and contribute to their overall comfort with both non-Indians and their life in the United States. The other equally important factor is the level of higher education, both college and university, and the resultant income contributing to an easier life. Many feel and work like Americans, yet this identity is not without conflict, since the world does not see them as American, and on their part, they too retain strong ties with India, and appreciate their Indian roots.

What was evident was the resilience of the women as they charted their educational trajectories and narrated the stories of their lives, the entries and the exoduses, and transformation that takes place during those turns. The singularity of this momentous event of immigration in their lives, of leaving their home country to a foreign land was partially due to financial and socio-cultural subjectivities. At the same time, questions of class race and ethnicity came to the fore compounded by historical and geographical factors. However, what contributed was the right opportunity at the right time and place.

Discussion

What this ethnographic study found was that no matter what the circumstances are, and how unsurmountable obstacles may be, the Indian women immigrants are able to overcome these challenges due to their commitment to education and hard work. Human capital increases through both education and experience, and manifests itself in the skills, quantum of knowledge, adaptation to the new habitat and the diverse circumstances in their lives, the social and personality attributes, as well as experience possessed by an individual, viewed in terms of their value by a country. Furthermore, education is an investment in human capital that pays off in terms of higher productivity. Thus, the combined elements of education and experience, resilience and versatility, cultivating human network and exploring beyond the ordinary (in this case immigration to a new country), has increased the human capital, equivalent to cultural, linguistic and educational capital of these women, and set them forth on their to success. Derived from and through education, human capital serves as a leveling mechanism, whether it is credits from college, or practical ideas to modify one's attitude. A good education can help overcome many barriers as it provides cognitive flexibility and fluency. Academic capital is in fact the guaranteed product of the combined effects of cultural transmission contributed by the educational institution one attends and the amount of cultural capital directly inherited from the family. Academia has value-inculcating and value-imposing operations, helping in the accumulation of experience and knowledge when applied beyond the bounds of the curriculum.

Asian-Indian-American women immigrants have developed their identity of the because of constant collaborations and communication between the capital they accrue: human, educational, financial, social and cultural against the backdrop of those that they already had, like the values they did abide by and further disseminated through religion, family and community life. However, the women who have succeeded are those who had a good education, fluency in the English language and acquired the necessary professional skills. It appears that when the American society confers upon them a hyphenated identity as an immigrant, and relegates them to a minority status, these immigrant women adapt themselves to the situation in a resilient manner and live their lives. They adopt proactive methods of coping like accomplishing and attaining another degree or skill, working hard and investing in extra hours to obtain a better salaried job, trying to give the best education for their children and generally strive towards upward mobility. Those who were unable to do so are mainly those who did not get the advantage of an education or relevant skills like Soha who eventually got herself a college degree in spite of many hurdles, and overcame these obstacles to make a life of her own. The resilient spirit manifests itself in many ways. This study was particularly interested in what makes the Indian American immigrant woman click in spite of adversities, so that in spite of the hyphenated identity, she is able to adapt, acclimatize and adjust.

While charting the education and career trajectories of Indian Asian American women immigrants in the United States, it was interesting to discover that it resonates with their resilience and success in the newly found homeland. There is no singularity of events that result in this phenomenon, but the influence of socio-cultural and economic issues;

class, race and ethnicity, geo-political strategies pervades, combined with the effects of globalization and transnationalism.

So, in this immigrant American society, what the immigrant Indian American women are asking is for society to cast another glance at them, and see that they have forged for themselves a different identity, not just a marginalized minority or a 'woman of color' vying for jobs with the existing members of the majority. The extant society has to accept and understand the new identity these new immigrants have developed over the years, 'assimilating' and 'adapting' as circumstances necessitated. Nevertheless, these women have definitely negotiated a space for themselves, and are constantly re-negotiating their existence. Like all other immigrant women, Indian American women initially have to work without privileges in spite of high accountability for themselves and their families, given the space, the mentality and the circumstances they are in, whether in the family or in the professional sphere. However, as they gradually find their voice, establish their presence on American soil, claim their needs and live up to their responsibilities, they will recognize the privileges and the freedom that they are granted, and use it to make a difference in their own lives and in the lives of others without that privilege. For many of the women who still have no choice, keep on voicing and asking for answers, even if the voices might be soft.

Conclusion

The purpose of this ethnographic research was to examine the identity formation of immigrant women in the diaspora. It investigated how transnational migration has affected the life's trajectories of the Asian Indian women in the United States. Conducted in an ethnographic manner, the basis of this investigation comprised of surveys, focus group interviews, and twenty-one individual interviews and narratives. Their personal stories emerged, outlining their life's trajectories and from this rich data, inferences were drawn. Factors like the human capital contributed to their integration in their host country along with the resiliency they exhibited in adapting to the new environment in terms of the level of education, proficiency in the English language, and adaptation to new professional skills. Such factors led to the formation of their newly minted hyphenated identity as Asian-Indian-American-immigrant women along with incidental factors like cultural and socio-economic aspects of class, race and ethnicity, and the shared effects of globalization and transnationalism.

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