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NARRATING THE DIASPORA DIFFERENTLY: AN ANALYSIS OF WHERE THE LONG GRASS BENDS

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ABSTRACT

This article deals with a close analysis of Neela Vaswani's short stories collection, Where the Long Grass Bends published in 2004. The inference that can be drawn after a close analysis of these stories is that not all second-generation immigrants are obsessed with the need to establish a relationship with the country of their origin, which has been the case with most first-generation diaspora writers. Vaswani, for the most part, steers clear of this pitfall that poses a major psychological hurdle in getting on with their lives in the country of their birth. In this sense, Vaswani's writing reveals a forward-looking mindset. Her penchant for experimentation with narrative modes also lends support and credence to this inference. The stories use innovative narrative strategies that are more in tune with the contemporary modes, allowing her to sidestep the inevitable, lapsing into the theorised themes. The characters in her stories are drawn from different ethnic backgrounds and thus can be grouped under stories that explore ethnic value systems and cultures. It is possible to discern an adherence to the conventional short story format in these stories.

Keywords: Diasporic Dilemma, Hybridity, Immigrants, Second-Generation Diaspora Writers, First-Generation Diaspora Writers

1. INTRODUCTION

Neela Vaswani is of mixed parentage (her mother was Irish, and her father was Indian). She was born in America in 1974 and thus an American citizen by birth, she teaches Fine Arts at an American university. Her collection of short stories, *Where the Long Grass Bends,* first published in 2004, was her first literary foray which was highly acclaimed. This was followed by the American Book Award-winning novel *You Have Given Me a Country* in 2010 and *Same Sun Here,* which she wrote in collaboration with Silas House in 2012. Her picture book *This is My Eye* published in 2018 was both written and illustrated by Vaswani. She was conferred with a Grammy award for the narration of *I Am Malala: How One Girl Stood Up for Education and Changed the World.* Apart from the award mentioned above, she also has been a recipient of several other awards, such as the O'Henry Prize (2006), the ForeWord Book of the Year Gold Medal, and the prestigious Italo Calvino Prize for Emerging Writers.

Her maiden literary venture, *Where the Long Grass Bends,* has won critical appreciation that can be termed as enviable. This is high praise indeed for a debut work. The collection features thirteen short stories of varying length, some as long as about forty pages ("The Excrement Man") and some as short as sixteen pages or even lesser ("Bing-Chen", "Domestication of an Imaginary Goat" and "The Rigours of Dance Lessons"). What strikes the reader upon first reading is the sheer lyricism and innovative use of language that has a subversive impact on conventional narrative strategies.

Though the author herself does not partition the book into sections in an obvious manner, it is possible to divide it into two parts based on the setting or the location of the stories. The division is notwithstanding the fact that most of the stories do not specify the location. It is only the incidental details that are presented in the stories that help the reader decipher the location. The first four stories are located either in India or have a distinct ethnic backdrop, for instance, the third story, "Twang". From the fourth story onwards, the location moves to cosmopolitan America. However, what is common to all stories and validates the inclusion of Vaswani as the second writer in the second-generation diasporic writers in this article is that though the majority of her stories do not engage with the Indian or Asian experience of immigration, nonetheless they show concerns of the writer.

Another rationale for the suggested division is that the first four stories are similar. The characters are drawn from different ethnic backgrounds and thus can be grouped under stories that engage with exploring ethnic value systems and cultures. In these stories, it is possible to discern an adherence to the conventional short story format. The other nine stories resonate and are marked with diversity in characters and narrative modes. The following part attempts a close reading of the stories to observe the articulation of the diasporic consciousness. The examination will be restricted to Vaswani's short fiction.

2. ANALYSIS

"Where the Long Grass Bends" is the first and title story of the collection. It opens with a powerful statement that can be seen as a remark made by a diasporic individual: "What difference does my conception make? I am here. How that came to be is not important" (3). The tone of the remark can be read as a response to the frequently asked questions about the diasporic mindset and self.

The story deploys the first-person narrative mode and revolves around the life of the narrator-protagonist, Elizabeth, an orphan who is taken care of by the Sisters of Christian Missionaries and studies in the sixth grade in a school run by the Sisters. The girl who has never known her parents has been told that she was not born of rape. All that she knows about her parents is what the Sisters at the mission have told her, and that her father was an Englishman and the mother a *Ghadhwali*. She experiences a sense of alienation owing to her very peculiar looks; she is "the only child with yellow hair and a black face" (4). She has been told that there is another like her, a boy with yellow hair and a black face who resides at the bottom of the cliff with the sadhus.

The peaceful running of the school is disturbed by the announcement of an election, the lead-up to which turns violent. The classes at the missionary school are ordered to be suspended by the local government since the rebels supportive of the Dalit candidate were believed to be hiding in the forest in the vicinity of the mission, which is located on the outskirts of the town. The Sisters try their best to keep the classes going, but the shoot-at-sight orders discourage the town children from attending the school. As a result, only the boarders attend these classes.

On the day of the election, violence escalates, and the premises of the mission are raided by an unruly mob that kills a Sister and a young girl. Elizabeth hides herself in an old piano which the frenzied mob rolls down the hill. As she comes out of the piano, she sees the mob setting a man on fire and watches him burn. The mob also burns down a police car.

The girl runs into 'Chris, the Colonist' who is hanging upside down on a tree branch and tells her that he grows leeches and that she must come and see them. He calls her Jarasandha, and the girl points out to him that her name is not Jarasandha. She notices that he walks on the balls of his feet. The Sisters find her and take her back. One night, she sees a man with a cut forehead whom she takes inside and shelters him. Though he is the rebel leader and a wanted man, she likes him. The Sisters find him at the chapel after a week and hand him over to the police. The rebellion ends with his capture and the shoot-on-sight orders are rescinded.

Elizabeth, consumed by the desire to meet the boy with the yellow hair and a black face like her and the leeches of Chris the Colonist, sneaks out of the boarding. Ironically as she sets out to meet Chris the Colonist, it is not she who finds him, but he finds her. He takes her to his hut and shows her the leeches, and begins to feed them with his blood, and so

does the girl. Once again, he addresses her as Jarasandha, and once again, the girl objects to being called by that name. She then asks him who Jarasandha is.

Chris the Colonist then tells her the story of Jarasandha, the son of the Vedic king Brihadratha – drawn from the epic *Mahabharata.* Vaswani weaves the Jarasandha legend into the plot. The telling of the tale seems to drain the energy from Chris, the Colonist, and he faints. The girl covers him with blankets and gets back to her boarding.

A few days later, the girl embarks on the search for the boy with yellow hair and a black face. She meets him on the summit of the mountain and asks him his name as he stares at her yellow hair. He says his name is Jarasandha, and he, too, like the Colonist, walks on the balls of his feet. What surprises the girl is that he, too, feeds the leeches, but unlike Chris, the Colonist's leeches, which are cultivated, the boy's leeches are those that occur naturally in the marshes. She then asks him if he feeds the Colonist's leeches, he denies knowing anyone by that name and that he does not care. He offers her to sit at his 'tub', which had been donated by the Sisters of the Mission to the Sadhus (17). A brief exchange ensues between them, with the girl asking him about his father, to which he replies that his father is crazy and that the *Sadhus* had won him (the boy) in a gambling game. The conclusion presents the restless girl as having found comfort in the company of the boy "with yellow hair and a black face!"

In many ways, this short story is a perfect representation of Vaswani's writing. For one, it resists summarisation and does not fit into a neat pigeonhole that makes interpretation easy. Also, "Where the Long Grass Bends" sets the template for other stories in the collection. The exploration of the east-west encounter and its ramifications on the ethnic or the native cultures that is indicated by the girl narrator-protagonist and the boy Jarasandha, who are both of mixed and biracial parentage, is one of the frequently examined themes in Vaswani's fiction.

In the story, two aspects of the encounter stand out: firstly, the difference between the mode of and what is seen as education and second, the attitude to history. It can be seen that the missionary Sisters are more rote-bound, whereas the boy Jarasandha's education comes from living amid unaffected nature. It is the rote-bound nature of education that the girl is receiving that causes restlessness and discomfort in her. She dislikes the name Elizabeth that is given to her. It may also be noted that the boy, too, disregards the taboos placed by the sadhus. The two of them symbolise hybridity and reject the so-called "pure" cultures of the Christian and indigenous faiths, which are represented by the Sisters and *Sadhus*, respectively, as can be inferred from the closing lines of the story.

Another detail that is important to note is the tendency to understand history. While the parentage of the girl, which is of recent occurrence, is shrouded in mist and is unclear, the story of Jarasandha is preserved intact. Chris the Colonist, a Christian, is contrasted with the Sisters of the Mission. Whereas the Sisters are unable to provide the girl with the details of her parents, Chris, partially reminiscent of William Wordsworth's character in the poem "Resolution and Independence" (also known as "The Leech-Gatherer"), is able to relate the story from the legend precisely. The possible explanation is that he is able to do it since he lives in the midst of and draws sustenance from nature. One of the most important motifs that often occur in diasporic writing is the journey. This short story, as do a few others in the collection such as "Twang", features journeys. The girl embarks on short sojourns in her quest for comfort and self that she finds when she meets and establishes a kinship with the boy who has yellow hair and a black face as she does.

The second story, "Possession at the Tomb of Sayyed Pir Hazrat Baba/Bahadur Saheed Rah Aleh", examines the lives of two spirits Gussa and Dukkha in a short episodic series. The story opens with the two spirits introducing themselves in first person. Gussa has come to live inside a woman and travels all over the woman's body – intestines, bladder, heart, liver, skull and lungs. Dukkha has possessed the body of a child. The spirit detached itself from the child's mother when her body was cremated. Like Gussa, Dukkha too has travelled all over the child's body. Apart from these two, there are other spirits named Khushi and Pathak.

Apsara, a woman possessed by one of these spirits, comes to the tomb of Sayyed Pir Hazrat Baba Bahadur Saheed Rah Aleh to be freed from the spirit. Apsara is accompanied by her husband Gopal and son Nanak. The bellowing woman conveys to her husband Gopal the spirit's desire to drink a salty lassi. The son goes to fetch the drink. The reader is told that the spirit has demanded about seven thousand five hundred rupees worth of goods which is "mostly kitchenware – a food processor with interchangeable blades, non-stick frying pan, a glass teapot that the spirit specified whistle, but not too shrilly, and a diamond-chip nose ring" (25).

It is interesting to note that these items are purchased and presented to the wife, Apsara, after which the spirit seems to be satisfied. Any such excuse as "I'll buy the teapot tomorrow after work" seems to enrage the spirit, and its displeasure

is shown in the reaction of the wife, who hisses and jerks (25). And when the nose ring is given to the wife, the spirit leaves the woman only to return with new demands.

A little later in the narrative, the spirit, through Apsara, demands that Gopal abstains from drinking whiskey. The spirit leaves her when the husband promises to give up drinking whiskey. The departure of the pure spirit is indicated by a pale yellow cloud of smoke that hangs over Apsara's head.

Two details in the story lead one to infer that the story is not about spirits at all but about the ingenuity of Indian women in finding ways to get their demands fulfilled. As can be noticed, all the items that the spirit demands are kitchenware or jewellery worn by Indian women. The spirit becomes pacified when these are offered. The second detail presented in the story is that the son carries these items home.

As typical diasporic writing goes, there is little in the story that can be seen as an engagement with the diasporic condition or experience in the same way in which the first-generation writers Bharati Mukherjee and Chitra Divakaruni and second-generation writer Jhumpa Lahiri negotiate. Nor is there any exploration of the hybridity theme as was seen in the titular story. The only east-west encounter in the story is the brief presence of a white woman at the tomb who seems to be possessed by a spirit called "curiosity". This can be inferred as a sub-text that presents a contrast between Indian women and Western women who visit the tomb. But the crucial fact is that the spirits appear to favour Indian women or children for possession. Thus, the spirits become a convenient means for Indian women to get their way and, by invoking the spirits, keep their men in check.

The third story, "Twang (Release)", shares some common features with the first story. To begin with, the narrator-protagonist, Aileen is a young girl of ten when the story opens. Just as the titular story can be seen as a *bildungsroman* in which a young girl arrives at an understanding of life, so also "Twang" traces the growing up of a girl. Both are written using the first-person mode and involve journeys. Though the geographical setting of the story is nowhere mentioned, it is possible to guess where it is located. The mention of birches and red foxes indicates that the story is set in the Himalayan region, possibly Kashmir, as the birch trees and red foxes in India are found only in this region.

Aileen, the narrator-protagonist, lives with her mother amidst wild nature, leading a life that reminds the reader of the hunter-gatherers who live by hunting small animals like squirrels and rabbits. As such, one of the skill sets necessary in this kind of life is the ability to use tools like bows. Aileen has been trained to wield the bow well by her mother. Her mother has taught her to hunt ("Daughter," […] "women kill" (43)). Such is the girl's proximity to nature that the birch trees tell her where to "find rabbit for stew and squirrel for pie" (43).

The girl is told that her father was a man from Brazil her mother had known him for only one year. The mother and daughter are joined by a mysterious woman who comes to live with them. Her arrival brings about a great deal of change in the attitude of both the daughter and mother. The daughter acquires a will and the mother's will wilts. The woman makes herself indispensable by telling the mother that the daughter would want to leave and find a man for herself when she grows older.

The woman's presence in the house is irksome to Aileen, who has developed an inexplicable resentment towards her. However, on two occasions, Aileen is forced to spend time with the woman as the mother goes out. There is friction between them. When the mother goes out the second time, she does not return. Thus, Aileen is forced to live with the woman, but their relationship is strained as they speak very less with each other.

A few days later, the woman dies caught in a hurricane. The hurricane is so strong that it brings the house down. After the hurricane abates, she is left alone. Sleeping on piles of leaves and eating carrots, onions and potatoes that she has carried. A change comes over her, she can no longer get herself to kill.

As she wanders through the birches, she comes to the edge of the woods. This fills her with uncertainty as she has never even in her thoughts imagined that the birches could end and there would be a world outside the woods. Her reaching the end of the birches also coincides with two other events: she turns nineteen on the day, and she also meets a man for the first time in her life. Since he is the only person, she has met apart from the woman. "I do not count my mother as a person I have met because she seems to be part of me, someone who was always there, someone who will always remain" (54). She stays with him in spite of being suspicious about his intentions.

The man takes her to the harbour, and they begin to sail in the ocean in a borrowed motorboat that is twenty feet long. As she is not used to journeying on seas, she develops seasickness which lasts for ninety days. The man nurses her back to health, and soon, they engage in sex. They continue to sail on the ocean for about five months, and when they run

out of food, they are forced to come back to the land. As they come back to the land, she realises that it is the same harbour.

They get back to the woods that she had left, and the man desires to leave her. She lets him go as she remembers her mother's words: "Life is like that, Aileen," she had said, "Sometimes you get things you don't want" (66). She goes back to her mother's house with her child inside her. The story ends with Aileen deciding that she would teach her daughter to have a strong will to let go.

Aileen comes full circle; she comes back to the place she leaves but not as the same person. She is now transformed, and her role in life has changed, she is no longer a daughter but a mother. This transformation can be attributed to the journey that she has undertaken. Aileen has followed her mother in every way, and her coming back suggests that she will continue to live the life her mother has taught her. This can be seen as her affirming a value system that she has been ingrained in her, and unlike many diasporic people, she returns home since her homing instinct, like most birds, is strong. Moreover, in both cases, her mother's and Aileen's, there is not much importance attached to the men who father their children. Men's role in their lives is limited to biological function.

The setting of the next story, "The Excrement Man", the last of the four stories that comprise the first set of stories, unlike the others examined earlier, is clearly revealed to the reader. The initial part is located in India, about four hundred kilometres from Delhi, and the later part moves to an unspecified Christian place across the ocean. The protagonist is Bandar, a man named after the old temple money. Bandar, with one blue eye, one brown, and a white forelock, is born in the height of the monsoon months "when the streets ran with water and shit floated around the cow's knees" (71).

The title of the story refers to Bandar. The third-person narrator calls him the "excrement man" due to his strange excretory behaviour, whenever he is upset or over-excited, he has the urge to defecate and then store the feces in a jar. The jar is then labelled with the details of the occasion. His habit was first mentioned very early in the narrative when as a young boy, Bandar begins the collection. He continues with the practice till his old age.

The doctor attributes Bandar's lock of white hair due to the extraordinary age of his father, "who at ninety-two did nothing but lie in bed, waiting for his young wife" (71). The astrologer remarks that the two-colour eyes indicate Bandar's future as a torn man. The cook, who has been with the family for several years, leaves believing that the baby has brought bad luck to the kitchen. Bandar is more attached to his older sister Somna and falls asleep only if she hangs his cradle to a Bodhi tree. Initially, this irks the mother as the boy would not sleep at her breast. Thus, Bandar's early childhood is spent hanging in the trees with monkeys playing above his head.

If Bandar is portrayed as a weird boy, Somna, the veritable foster mother, is eccentric too. She is born asleep with a huge head of black hair and has snored through the first couple of days after she was born and crawled on the fourth. She is beset with a strange malaise, she falls asleep if she is stopped from running, of which she is fond. She hibernates during the monsoon months and locks herself in her room so that she will not drown. Another important character in the story is Mez, a Muslim girl. She has been named Mez because she was born on a table in the middle of the market and is almost deaf. She takes a liking for Somna and Bandar, so much so that she helps him out with family chores, such as chopping the onions that have been assigned to him by his mother.

The story is about these three characters who flee from their houses for different reasons. Bandar decides to run away because he overhears the astrologer telling his mother that the "two-coloured son had a Black Spot on his chart", which made him unfit for marriage as no family that consulted Bandar's graph would consent to get their daughter married to him. The mother is upset upon hearing this and exclaims she is cursed since the son is destined never to be married and the daughter suffers from a strange sleeping disorder. The astrologer suggests that Bandar could be sent to a Christian place where no one would know about his chart. Moreover, the astrologer says that Bandar's palm indicates his future aspiration to travel very prominently. Somna too, has to leave because no one will marry her since she is too sleepy. Mez has to leave because she has had a sexual encounter with Bandar, and he has marked her with his hand; hence she will be disgraced.

They cross the ocean and arrive at an unspecified "Christian place" (93). Bandar makes it a point to carry the accumulated collection of labelled jars with his excretion. Bandar builds a house for himself and his sister and buys a house for Mez. A special storeroom is created for the storage of the excretion-containing jars in Bandar's house. During their second year, Bandar invites Mez to his house for dinner. The dinner ends on a disastrous note for Mez, who perceives insult when Bandar remarks that she has been aptly named Mez, which translated into English means table and like a table, she is simple and plain. Mez has come to the dinner in a red dress, hoping Bandar would recall the sexual

encounter. She slams her fists on the table and pays back Bandar in his own coin, saying that he, too has been aptly named Bandar (monkey) since he looks and acts like one.

By the end of the first year, Mez establishes herself as a seamstress, and people find themselves attracted to her. They assume that she is an American Indian named after corn (maize). Women who come to see her are so taken in by her that they reveal their deepest secrets and problems without realising that she rarely opens her mouth. By the end of the fourth year, she becomes so adapted to the Christian place that she eats their bland food and celebrates Easter.

With her relationship with Bandar strained and Somna's visits to her house becoming rare, Mez feels lonely and craves companionship. It is at this juncture that she develops intimacy with a named James. He tells her of his adulterous wife. He proposes marriage to her, and she accepts it. Soon their wedding is solemnised by a bishop. However, the marriage ends with James' wife arriving at Mez's house and taking away her husband. Time passes, and Bandar is now an old man, as is Mez. Somna has become increasingly sleepy and soon dies. He meets Mez, and they re-establish their relationship. The bizarre love story ends on a happy note, with the two of them leaving the town and heading towards a place that Mez has always imagined.

As can be seen from the close reading, two important aspects draw attention to the backdrop of this love story. The first is Bandar's strange habit of collecting his excretion and storing it carefully, and the second is the quintessential diasporic feature of the journey undertaken by the principal character. The narrative beautifully links these two aspects. The jars that contain Bandar's excreta are very carefully preserved by him, which can be seen as his penchant for holding on to emotional baggage that weighs him down by hindering him from finding love and freedom. This becomes evident towards the end when he decides to leave behind those jars. His union with Mez is never realised as long as he clutches onto his jars, and the moment he decides to let go of them, their love finds consummation. Thus, the jars can be read as being symbolic of unwanted baggage of the past.

The journey motif surfaced in the first set of stories and plays a prominent role. Though in Vaswani, the geographical displacement does not trigger the same kind of existentialist trauma that the characters in the fiction of other diasporic writers investigated in this article, it does bring about a significant transformation in their lives. The translocation affects the characters in different ways. While Bandar and his sister fail to adapt to the culture of the new place, Mez's ability to assimilate can be explained as being due to her flexible nature.

Bandar and Somna, with their adherence to the past, become inflexible. Their inflexibility manifests itself in Bandar's attachment to his jars and Somna's vulnerability to fall asleep for long periods of time, sometimes even six months. Somna perishes because she is not able to overcome her sleepiness, and Bandar, though not consciously, becomes aware of the pitfalls that accompany carrying the past. The message, which the story conveys very subtly, is that one has to move on, letting go of the past. Further, no solace comes to an individual if she/he is stuck to her/his past, even if there is a change of location.

The next story, "Sita and Ms. Durber", is the first of the second set of stories in the collection, all of which are located in America. The short story narrates the efforts of the thirty four year old Ms. Durber, an arts teacher. She helps her precocious five-year-old student Sita to take joy in ordinary things. Sita is a daughter of a couple who has recently migrated from Malaysia to America. In Malaysia, the mother, Mrs. Parthivendra, was a surgeon, and Sita's father was a reputed architect. However, in America, they run a restaurant.

As the story progresses, the reader notices that the encounters between the well-meaning Ms. Durber and Sita acquire a subtle racial undertone. Ms. Durber is wonder-stuck at the extraordinary ability of the child to draw and paint realistically. The teacher notices that though the child's capabilities are well beyond the abilities of her classmates, Sita shows no inclination to leave or move faster. Sita's talent becomes a site of resentment for the other children in the class, and they consciously avoid her. All her attempts to be friendly with them meet with rebuffs and slurs. They alienate her.

A few months later, a change comes over Sita. She exhibits malicious tendencies, recklessly knocking over the architectural models of her classmates and sniggering at the mispronunciation of words during reading sessions. The teacher interprets this as an indication of a feeling of superiority and supremacy. The teacher attributes the change in her behaviour to her being "disturbed, unhealthily sequestered" (113).

Eager to help the child, Ms. Durber sets up a meeting with Sita's mother. The teacher tells the mother that Sita, with her extraordinary abilities, is somewhat isolated and advises Mrs. Parthivendra to allow the child to have more fun as she works extremely hard (115). The mother very politely informs Ms. Durber that Sita plays musical instruments and is taken to museums and operas, and she has her fun there. Ms. Durber is insistent that the child needs to be "more

ordinary" (116). The mother invites the teacher to help the child to be more ordinary if she is really convinced of what the child needs. After the mother and the daughter leave, Ms. Durber's exclamation "Haughty witch" (116) indicates what she thinks of her.

After this meeting, there is a perceptible change in Sita's behaviour from the point of view of Ms. Durber, who has been keeping a close watch on her. She observes that Sita sits in the class "slack and bored" (116) and seems to come to life only in the free-draw classes. In these classes, Sita draws her own left hand over and over again. The sketches are increasingly realistic, and the supremacy is replaced with a look of "wary interest" (116). The other children seem to be more accepting of her. The teacher is glad that she had a talk with Sita's mother.

To provide some ordinary fun, Ms. Durber proposes to take Sita to a circus and plans to bring her ten year old nephew Nelson. At the circus, a family of four sits in the row behind three of them. In the group, a girl with green-blonde hair is about the same age as Sita and sits directly behind her. The girl snorts like a pig, bounces, rolls her eyes dramatically when her mother asks her to stop, empties a container of Jujubes on the floor, and makes her little brother pick them up (119). A little later, the girl screams, "Yes Yes Yes" when a chimpanzee jumps in and out of a flaming hoop.

Sita is not used to this priggish behaviour, and she curiously watches the girl. The teacher asks Sita to ignore the girl and remarks that she is trying to get attention. A little later, the girl utters an obscenity when a bearded magician appears in the circus ring that invites her mother's wrath and a slap. With that, the girl goes to sleep with her thumb in her mouth. Sita imitates the screaming. Nelson brings her a hot dog which she eats. The sights at the circus, like the chimpanzee leaping through the flame, clowns, motorcycle stuntmen and a midget, clearly leave an impression on Sita's mind. She sketches them in a notebook which she leaves in the car.

Later, Ms. Durber receives a call from a distraught Mrs. Parthivendra, who informs her that Sita's behaviour is causing her concern. It appears that Sita refuses to play on the cello or read, and at dinner, she throws the food on the floor and demands a hot dog. She tells Ms. Durber that they are vegetarians. Ms. Durber tries to brush it off, remarking that it is a passing phase and Sita is trying out new things.

As Ms. Durber drowns her guilt with a gin and tonic, she flips through Sita's sketchbook and is astonished at what she sees. She finds the sketch of the clown with an orb in his mouth frightening. Ms. Durber finds her own sketches in the sketchbook of Sita; the portraits are like.

From the point of view of the article's interest, two sub-texts that are very subtly woven into the narrative are of significance. The first is the racial undertones that mark the interactions between Ms. Durber and the immigrant family. Ms. Durber's insistence on Sita having some "ordinary fun" can be seen as an attempt to impose American culture on the non-western Sita. Though Mrs. Partivendra very gently points out that Sita has fun by playing the cello or reading or going to the opera, Ms. Durber thinks otherwise. The way Sita is seen as "loony" as Nelson tells his aunt (121). When Mrs. Partivendra informs Ms. Durber that Sita is demanding a hot dog, she does not seem to be concerned about it and calls it a "phase" (122) and says that the mother should not be too worried about it.

The inference that can be drawn is that the young child is being made to conform to Western social norms. As Sita's teacher, this imposition seems to have an impact, as the change in Sita's behaviour shows. The second is the contrast between Sita and the priggish girl's behaviour at the circus. The girl is shown as enjoying the appearance of the clown and the midget, whereas it troubles Sita. Sita's sketches show an uncomfortable truth about American society.

The next story, "Five Objects in Queens", can be viewed as being in the same terrain as some of Bharati Mukherjee, Chitra Divakaruni and Jhumpa Lahiri's fiction. The story can be considered as a good example of a nuanced exploration of the idea of home that is conceptualised by the two generations and the role of memory in the lives of first generation diasporic individuals.

The story is narrated in chronological order in a series of five short episodes located at different intervals in time that capture the progress of a biracial couple and their two American born daughters. The family comprises of the Indian husband, Kumar, his Irish wife, Mary and the two daughters, Rita and Priyanka. The episodes cover a period of fifteen years between 1979 and 1994. All five are located in a locality called Astoria, Queens.

The first episode with the title "White Nova. Circa 1979. Astoria, Queens" opens with a mention of how the two daughters and their grandmother Dado use the backseat of a Nova car that belongs to their cousin Bablu for their "misdemeanors" (127). Bablu, whose driving licence was cancelled after the accrual of several speeding tickets, has parked the car under a tree in front of the family's building. Rita, the elder daughter, smokes cigarettes and hides her lipstick, Priyanka, the younger one, stretches on red leather and attempts to sing like the pop icon Aretha Franklin. The

diabetic grandmother throws the insulin in the neighbour's trashcan and eats cakes and Ayurvedic tablets. The backseat of the car becomes a convenient place for the three to carry out their nefarious activities.

In the course of the narration of the first episode, Kumar and Mary are visiting relatives in Bangalore, and so the grandmother has come from Bombay for a couple of months to look after two girls. The absence of the parents presents the girls with freedom to live out their indulgences, while for Dado, it is time when she can fulfil her liking for sweet savouries denied to her in India. The episode presents a contrast between the mindsets of the American-born girls and the Indian grandmother. This is indicated by Dado's remark that "Maruthis are nicer" (128) upon sitting in the Nova for the first time. The girls have no such reference points and use the car to drive around in the neighbourhood. Vaswani captures their infringements of "the rules of the household on the refrigerator, under a Yosemite Sam magnet" (128) left by the parents crisply and comically.

The second episode, titled "Gardening Gloves. Circa 1980. Astoria, Queens", presents interactions between the girls and their parents. Mary is shown as being a gardening buff who tends to her plants with the utmost care, while the girls, typical of American teenagers, have other things to occupy their minds.

The episode is woven around the metaphor of transplanting. Kumar is not found in the garden when Mary is transplanting, as the sound of roots being torn, and the separation of clustered flowers upset him. He remarks that it is unnatural to leave roots behind, to which Mary replies:

"That's why flowers put out so many, so some will survive. Like the Irish and children. […] If you and my grandmother hadn't uprooted, we would have no Priyanka, no Rita."

"True, true," Kumar said. Still, when Mary transplanted, he stayed inside. (134)

Mary finds great solace in gardening; the therapeutic effect it has on her, helps her to bond with her daughters well. "Brown Ceramic Plate. Circa 1984. Astoria, Queens", the third episode, sees Rita's penultimate year at college. The brief episode shows the family as having the usual differences in opinion. In this section of the story, the reader is informed that Mary has been diagnosed with cancer. The knowledge saddens her that she will have to leave them soon.

The fourth episode narrated is set in 1991, six years after the previous one. The girls have grown up and moved out of their apartment in Astoria. Rita has moved out to Brooklyn and lives with the woman Grace and their one-year-old adopted daughter. Priyanka and her Jamaican husband live in Manhattan. Kumar and Mary now have the apartment to themselves. The three families meet in Astoria every Saturday.

The discovery of a lump on Mary's back and the absence of the girls has a debilitating effect on Kumar, which is manifested in him finding it difficult to sleep at night. And when he sleeps, he dreams in Sindhi and cries for his dog, who died forty-five years ago in Kalyan. A worried Mary signs him up for swimming classes and teaches him to use snorkels and clean the lens of a mask by spitting and then rinsing. The episode ends with Mary dying.

The last section, "Cuticle Scissors. Circa 1994. Astoria, Queens", shows the widower Kumar, alone now in the apartment, lapsing in memories of his life with Mary and growing up days of his daughters. Every object in the house reminds him of some incident or the other associated with his wife, daughters and mother. The visit of his daughters temporarily mitigates his loneliness.

Though no elaborate observations are made that can be inferred as articulations of the diasporic condition, the story sets up a contrast between the attitudes of the first and second generations of immigrants. Kumar frequently lapses into bouts of memory of his homeland, India, whereas his daughters do not have to carry the weight of such baggage. Thus, the subtle implication, as is usually found in such contrast portrayed by other writers, is that the first generation is backwards-looking, and the second generation is forward-looking in the process of adaptation and assimilation.

"Bing-Chen", the next story in the collection, is roughly in the same mould as some of the stories in Bharati Mukherjee's *The Middleman and Other Stories.* The similarity is in the sense that Vaswani, like Mukherjee, does not restrict herself to the exploration of the lives of Indian immigrants to the West but also migrants from other non-Western societies.

The story revolves around one single event: the second generation Chinese Bing-Chen's visit to a salon for a haircut. His mother is Chinese, and father is a German American who has abandoned them. He is goaded by his mother to get a haircut and buy a Chinese newspaper on his way. The story opens with his mother's gentle insistence, almost bordering on nagging, on him getting his hair trimmed at a salon of her acquaintance.

Though on the surface of it, the mother wants her son Bing-Chen to have a haircut, it is possible to notice that she wants him to get acquainted with Chinese girls for obvious reasons. In the salon, he sees two other Chinese girls who have come to get their hair done for their prom night. As he watches them, he is filled with envy. The envy that wells up in him, Vaswani gently hints, is the result of Bing-Chen's inability to feel at home as he experiences discomfiture in contrast with the girls who seem to be comfortable.

Bing-Chin's inability to feel at ease in the White or Asian society is typical of the second generation's dilemma. This dilemma cuts across ethnicities and is true of immigrants from non-Western cultures. The inference is that the ordeal is not specific to Indian immigrants. Bing-Chen's mother's need to be connected to the land of her birth is indicated by her compulsion to be abreast of what is happening there and her anxiety about the news about the flood in the Chinese city Guilin is strongly reminiscent of Mr. Pirzada, the Bangladeshi professor in Jhumpa Lahiri's "When Mr. Pirzada Came to Dine" whose compulsion to remain in touch with his country through the television during the turbulent years of his country's birth.

In "Domestication of an Imaginary Goat", Vaswani's writing is marked with abstraction and vagueness. Narrated by an omniscient third person, the story traces the ups and downs of the relationship between a young first generation Indian woman living in America and her American boyfriend. The goat is projected as a signifier of the home that the unnamed woman desires to have. On one level, the story skillfully and in an understated manner engages with the typical themes that characterise the writing of the diaspora – the ideas of home, belonging and a backward-looking mindset, and on the other hand, hints at the subtle manner in which patriarchal codes operate and is enforced on women cutting across cultures and geographical boundaries. The story makes an attempt to interweave the two themes.

The short story opens with the line, "She wanted to sew him a goat, but the idea of incomplete was unbearable" (165), clearly indicates the impossibility of the immigrant woman's desire to set up a home in the host land. What comes in the way is the man's overt patriarchal attitude. The woman's resentment and resistance to it comes out when he buys her a sweater on a visit to the beach, noticing that she is cold, which is narrated graphically.

She is not ungrateful, and man's kindness and human nature are not lost on her. But her resentment stems from the fact that what she liked and did not like was not important, "It was simply that she did not like mauve, and he knew that, but he had decided her dislike was unimportant" (166). His priorities are different and are focused on simple and practical matters, he has noticed that she was cold, and he wanted to please her and make her warm and comfortable. However, what she is not happy about is the fact that he had decided without acceding to her likes and dislikes. She realises that her desire to set up a home would be fulfilled if she is willing to compromise her identity as a woman. Her comprise is not overtly stated, but the thought is unbearable to her.

As can be seen from the above-cited passage, the artist's painting reflects the societal demand that women must be rendered submissive and docile by denying them the articulatory agencies. Being a *Sindhi* ("*Sindhis* do as they please, she said; we are a wild bunch" (174)), foregoing the right to maintain her individuality was not acceptable to her. All she requires from the relationship is that it be based on mutual respect and the availability of private space.

Though the story does not conclude with any indication as to which way the relationship will go, the woman, meanwhile, is not inclined to terminate the relationship or give up her hopes. The implication is that one's desire for home is eternal, and for a woman, the quest involves walking the tightrope.

The next story, "The Rigors of Dance Lessons", is one of the shortest stories in the collection. The story has a first-person male narrator of indeterminate nationality and ethnicity. It is as phantasmagorical as it is bizarre, with no perceptible theme reminiscent of contemporary postmodernist writing. The opening few lines of the story set the tone:

> I see my wife squatting on the ground, looking for something.
>
> "What is it?" I call to her, she answers me simply: "I have lost you."
>
> In body, she is not herself but an old man wearing the collar of a priest and a fishing hat. The hat is stuck with metal lures that glint and tinkle. Over the ground, her hands skim quickly. She will not look up at me.
>
> "Well," I say, "don't worry, I'll help," and drop beside her.
>
> "Where did you last see me?"
>
> She points to a building I had not noticed. I look away from the spiny white whiskers pushing through her chin. (180)

And suddenly, she suggests that they need dance lessons. The scene then shifts to a dance floor. As they sit against a mirrored wall, the narrator notices that there is a boy dressed in a tuxedo, two women who are sisters, one dark-skinned and the other light and several girls in patent-leather tap shoes. In the corner, the narrator sees the flip-flops he bought his wife several years ago and, in another corner, stacks of cupcakes the wife had baked for him the previous week. Then follows bouts of vigorous dancing by the boy and the two girls. The man tries to imitate the dancers but finds it difficult and to be rigorous. The wife once again shifts shape and becomes the boy in the tuxedo when she comments on the dancing abilities of her husband and offers him a cupcake. The story ends with an assurance, "We are fine; she has had this dream before" (187).

"Bolero", like "Five Objects in Queens" and "Procession at the Tomb of Sayyed Pir Hazrat Baba Bahadur Saheed Rah Aleh", uses, by now a familiar aspect of her writing, the episodic narrative format and provides section headings. Another experiment that she attempts is blending sections of prose with poetry even as the narrative collapses time.

The short story "Bolero" narrates the growth of a young boy, Felix, who aspires to be a musician. The story begins in the backdrop of a war, presumably the Spanish Civil War, which is hinted at by the sub-heading "War: Euskal Herria". The boy's mother drops him off on her father's farm. The grandfather is an accomplished musician. The boy grows to love the farm life and the animals on the farm as he learns to play the piano, violin and other musical instruments.

Soon after, there is an air raid with fighter planes dropping bombs, amid the blitzkrieg, the grandfather asks Felix to play the violin. Thus, two worlds are juxtaposed, both created by human beings but representing contrasting aspects of human civilizational achievements, war representing the worst of dimension and music symbolising the best of human culture.

The next section of the story, titled "Evolution", shows Felix learning the importance of music in a world torn by hatred and violence. As time passes, the grandfather is no more, and Felix's mother sells the farm to raise the money to enroll him in the Julliard School of Music – a promise she has made to her father. Several years later, Felix becomes a conductor for the Baltimore Symphony Orchestra and, at the age of sixty-seven, meets Ilona, a singer who is thirty-six years old. The rest of the narrative narrates the growing intimacy between the two. From the point of view of the article, "Bolero" offers very little comment on the diasporic condition. However, what is of interest is Vaswani's preference for experimenting with narrative modes.

The next story, "The Pelvis Series", narrates the story of an ethologist and cultural anthropologist Eve, who holds a doctoral degree in linguistics. She is involved in experimental studies in chimpanzee communication behaviour using ASL (American Sign Language). Her interest in primates is stimulated by a visit to an indoor forest which simulates conditions like a fog that help the animals housed there to experience the real conditions of their habitat. Her father takes her to the forest when she is a bare toddler. She is fascinated by a chimp that she sees in a glass enclosure. She shares an instinctive vibe with the primate.

The narrative then fast-forwards to the present. As the story advances, the reader is informed that Eve's parents were killed in an airplane crash when she was twenty-four. In the course of her work, she meets Lola, a bonobo or a pygmy chimpanzee with whom she develops a strong emotional bond. Eve, who has no family of her own, Lola becomes a surrogate family member. However, Lola has given birth to a male offspring which takes the place of Lola in Eve's life. The story ends with Eve and Pan, the young chimp building a good rapport.

"Pelvis Series" is a touching story that draws attention to the plight of primates who are used for experimental studies and hints at the cruel and inhuman treatment meted out to them in the name of experiments. It exposes the hypocrisy and double standards entrenched in endeavours that proclaim to advance knowledge. However, the story does not engage with the exploration of the predicament of the diaspora, which is the focal point of the present article.

The same is the case with "An Outline of No Direction," the next short story in the collection. What impresses the reader is the bold experiment that Vaswani undertakes in narrating her short stories. The narrative uses a bulleted outline with four cardinal points (North, West, South and East) as the frame. The implicit suggestion is that the entire narrative is an outline, as the title itself indicates. The short story, which can be seen as an unorthodox travel narrative veiled manner, revisits the idea of American identity and geography even as it gently satirises the stereotypical American mindset.

The last story, "Blue, Without Sorrow", records the musings of a thirty-one-year-old woman named Teresa during the last stages of her life. As she lies dying on the hospital bed in Arizona, her mind travels back in time and recalls some key incidents in her life. It is through the flashbacks that the author reveals unobtrusively to the reader some vital

information about her. The use of the first-person narrative mode that is so well suited to a narrative like this heightens the impact by lending poignancy to the story.

Teresa's roots are in Mexico; her mother, an American teacher, immigrated to Mexico from New Orleans and has married a Mexican farmer and settled down there. Her mother dies in giving birth to the tenth child, and her death goads Teresa into deciding to never get married. Teresa's early upbringing is in an agricultural set-up.

The opening lines provide a hint to the theme of the story: *Lover, where are you? Fish. Flesh. Flame. I am waiting for you* (259). What follows indicates that the protagonist Teresa's search is a spiritual one, and the rest of the narrative is an elaboration on her quest. The narrative distinguishes between what is religious and what is spiritual and suggests that spirituality is, in a way, connected with adherence to religion.

Born in a Christian family, she is encouraged, even insisted upon, especially by her father, a staunch Christian to join the church. However, as she grows older, she begins to feel that there is no escape from loneliness. As she grows older, she has a brief romantic affair with Manuel, her senior at school by eight years. They live in a city for about six months, during which time Teresa says she "believed in him with a fervent devotion" (265). But he, too, abandons her and refuses to come to her where she desperately calls for him, preferring an older woman. He gives her the excuse that she makes him feel false and that he does not deserve her ardour.

Teresa recounts another incident in which she comes across an Indian story about the relationship between Mira and the blue God, Krishna. She is haunted by this relationship which transcends the physical and transports her in a spiritual realm. What captures Teresa's imagination in her quest is the promise of a meaningful relationship that goes beyond the physical life – something that helps her face death on a hopeful note.

Though the short story does have the potential to explore the immigrant experience in the host country, it consciously does not pursue it. However, in one aspect, this can be seen as sharing an important characteristic of diasporic writing, the role that memory and nostalgia play in the lives of such people. A close examination of the short fiction of Vaswani reveals that her writing is a blunt contrast to Jhumpa Lahiri's. In comparison, most of Lahiri's writing is centred around exploring the diasporic dilemmas confronting the generation of immigrants; Vaswani's ventures into other areas that have not been brought under the theorisation of diasporic writing. One can notice that the short stories explore a wide range of themes that are not found in Lahiri or the first-generation writers.

3. CONCLUSION

The inference that can be drawn from the close reading of *Where the Long Grass Bends* is that not all second immigrants are obsessed with the need to establish a relationship with the country of their origin, which has been the case with most diasporic writers. Vaswani, for the most part, steers clear of this pitfall that poses a major psychological hurdle in getting on with their lives in the country of their birth. In this sense, Vaswani's writing reveals a forward-looking mindset. What also lends support and credence to this inference is her penchant for experimentation with narrative modes. The stories use innovative narrative strategies that are more in tune with the contemporary modes that allow her to sidestep the inevitable lapsing into the theorised themes.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None.

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None.

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