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Meagna A. Patinella
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**Narrating the Middle Ground: The Examination of Objects in the
Modern Genre of Immigrant Fiction**

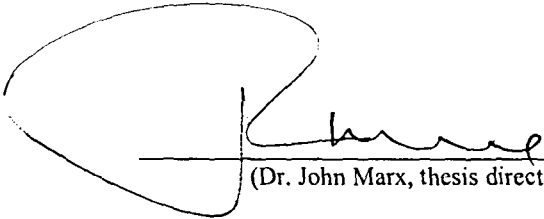
Meaghan A. Patinella

Honors Thesis
Department of English
University of Richmond

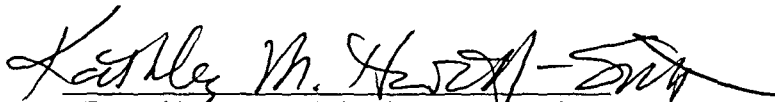
Spring 2004

Dr. John Marx, Thesis Director

The signatures below certify that with this essay Meaghan Patinella has satisfied the thesis requirement for Honors in English.



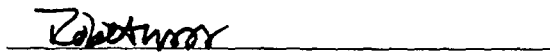
(Dr. John Marx, thesis director)



(Dr. Kathleen Hewett-Smith, departmental reader)



(Dr. Elisabeth Gruner, departmental reader)



(Dr. Robert Nelson, English honors coordinator)

When displaced from their usual environment, objects catch our attention. They jump out at us, as though begging to be noticed. Reterritorialized in fiction, they draw our analytic gaze. In the fiction I consider, a Hindu statue appears in an English kitchen, while a Christmas wreath hangs on an Indian family's door. Although inanimate, these objects encourage interpretation and explanation of their placement in unexpected surroundings.

Dislocated objects tell stories about the places they come from, their migration, and their new surroundings. More importantly, they disclose the narratives of people that possess or interact with them.¹ In this paper I examine objects present in novels of immigration and transnational movement, for objects in such fictions are most noticeably dislodged from their original or expected context. Their relocation allows me to interpret them and their narratives, which in turn, allows me to think about the genre of immigrant fiction in a new light.

In this genre it is apparent that not only keepsake things such as pictures and religious statues, but also seemingly generic articles of clothing or tag sale furniture tell narratives of the past. Immigrants' display and consumption of certain objects induces memories of family, of former lives, or of ties to the motherland. As well, objects in immigrant fiction can become notable reminders of failed or accomplished dreams of one's place in the new society. I will explain how objects in immigrant fiction come to possess these aspects. I focus on the interests and desires of migrant characters since this

¹ In her essay "Paths That Wind through the Thicket of Things," Lesley Stern argues that the objects in the 1941 film, *The Maltese Falcon*, and Wilkie Collins's 1868 novel, *The Moonstone* are accursed and therefore "generate narrative effects" and "generate an excess of affect" (319).

will allow me to distinguish one particular mode of privileging things from the more general theory of things.²

In doing so, I rely on Arjun Appadurai's study of objects, which has been relentlessly transnational in its emphasis, Svetlana Boym's study of migrant domestic décor, and Rosemary George's study of metaphoric luggage in immigrant fiction. While such scholarship has been indispensable to my analysis, studying objects in fiction enables me to further these arguments by producing an updated interpretation of the immigrant fiction genre. Where Appadurai is interested in systems of commodities, my analysis works at the level of the individual. Where Boym studies art installations and fixed aesthetic objects, reading fiction allows me to examine objects in motion, for narratives insinuate a sense of movement. In addition, my analysis of objects in immigrant fiction pushes George's study forward by supplementing her notion of desire. While George studies the migrant's "homelessness," "homesickness," and desire for home, my focus is on how objects embody the acquiescence to something new.

The ultimate goal of my thesis is to supplement our habitual perception of immigrants and immigrant fiction. Whereas immigrant fiction has typically featured either tales of assimilation into a new nation or nostalgia for a homeland left behind, the most recent instances of this genre portray immigrants struggling to come to grips with perpetual mobility. These are novels about characters who cannot or will not assimilate and who similarly are not overly nostalgic. Such an ambivalent condition also figures prominently in current scholarship and journalism about immigration. The *New York Times* reporters Deborah Sontag and Cecelia W. Dugger observe,

² The best of such research and thing theory can be found in the works of Bill Brown and John Frow.

For modern immigrants...the homeland is no longer something to be forsaken, released into a mist of memory or nostalgia. As the world has grown smaller, the immigrant experience has inevitably changed. Unlike the Europeans who fled persecution and war in the first half of the century, few modern immigrants abandon their motherland forever...Instead they straddle two worlds” (Sontag and Dugger).

Immigration today is complicated by the fact that it no longer implies simply traveling from point A to point B. Sociologist Saskia Sassen explains that migrating has become a process of acquiring transnational identification. “However,” she states, “we are still using the language of immigration to describe this process” (Sassen 188). The current moment of globalization is characterized by unprecedented mobility and perpetual border crossings, and the result has been rapid change in the social constructions of various ethnicities and other types of social groups. “It is true that throughout history people have moved and through these movements constituted places,” Sassen allows, “But today the articulation of territory and people is being constituted in a radically different way at least in one regard- the speed with which that articulation can change” (Sassen 191). Rapid oscillations of deterritorialization and reterritorialization produce an increased “unmooring of identities.”

Literary critic Katherine Payant agrees that immigrants have become “transnational” subjects. While new immigrants have been uprooted from their traditional sources of identity, modern advancements allow them to still be in touch with their land and families.

Another distinguishing characteristic of this new group setting them apart from earlier waves of immigrants is that they tend to maintain close ties with their former countries for several generations. Rather than severing ties and not looking back as many earlier immigrants were forced to do, modern communications and travel have made it possible to communicate with those ‘back home’ frequently, to send children to be with grandparents during the summer, and to travel home frequently for visits.

This new ‘transnationalism’ (and sometimes dual citizenship), plus the acceptance of multicultural lifestyles in the United States, has slowed the process of assimilation greatly. Many of these people live in ethnic enclaves and continue with the customs of their native lands; though considering themselves American, they consciously choose not to assimilate to certain aspects of the American lifestyle they consider undesirable for themselves and their children (xxi).

While the speed of deterritorialization has rapidly increased, the process of assimilation has greatly slowed. This discrepancy contributes to the “unmoored identities” that Sassen describes; the immigrants are physically detached from their homeland yet are never mentally or emotionally attached to the new nation. They now occupy a discomfited middle ground and only partially identify with each country.

If it is true that the new sociology of immigration has been accompanied by a new fiction of immigration, we may find in this new genre narratives in which the immigrant never fully leaves home and never fully assimilates. Novels of the older generation depicted the immigrant as detached from his homeland; in order to assimilate he had to cut ties with the former nation. The old narrative presented an inverse relationship between the immigrant’s connection to the new nation and homeland: the more assimilated the immigrant became, the less connected he was to the homeland. Until the latter part of last century, the subjects of these novels were disjointed from the old world. As literary critic William Q. Boelhower explains in his 1980 essay, “as the protagonist discovers America first hand he is *separated* from the Old World. Ultimately, this leads the protagonist to idealize the Old World- ...through an attempt to preserve his Old World culture, even though he may be assimilated into the New World culture” (Boelhower 5). While the old immigrant narrative depicted the immigrant’s severance from the old world, the severance in turn caused him to romanticize his homeland and

home culture.³ However, at the brink of the new millennium, the genre underwent a noticeable transformation. Just as the immigrants of today can identify with the new nation while remaining connected to the homeland, the new narrative depicts the immigrant as partially connected to both nations. This new genre expands on the “transnational” identities that Sassen and Payant describe, and portrays modern immigration as a process resulting in partial identities. While the immigrant subjects are deterritorialized from their home country, they are only reterritorialized as transnational subjects. The genre shows the immigrants as awkwardly situated: they never fully leave home emotionally and mentally, yet never fully assimilate.

The four novels I examine are Meera Syal’s *Anita and Me*, Hari Kunzru’s *The Impressionist*, Monica Ali’s *Brick Lane*, and Jhumpa Lahiri’s *The Namesake*; each exemplifies the new immigrant narrative. All published within the last eight years, each novel handles the matter of incomplete assimilation. I analyze the objects that the immigrants of these novels possess or desire and how these objects are acquired, used, or displayed. In doing so I determine the way in which the object comes to embody the migrant’s desires, and how the object helps the migrant relate to the world around him. In studying objects in the realm of immigrant fiction, I use the sociological and historical perspectives of objects to generate a sense of the social context this specific genre is shaped by and helps to shape. Fiction supplies the scenario, characters, and objects through which to interpret personal attempts at and desires for cultural stability and cultural change. The last ten years have witnessed mobility on a scale that boggles the

³ Sam Selvon’s 1956 novel, *The Lonely Londoners*, tells the stories of West Indian migrants who relocate to post-war period London. The immigrants do not bring luggage or anything reminiscent of home with them. They focus their energy on finding accommodations, work, and love in London, yet they come across incredible hardships and discrimination instead. Homeless and hungry, the immigrants survive, yet they acquire bitterness towards London and idealize their West Indian home.

mind. Fiction makes this development intelligible by situating it on the page, making it comprehensible, and by rendering it in narrative form. The narratives I study function as experiments to understand migration in the context of globalization: they tell stories that ought to help general readers as well as more specialized sociologists, historians, and theorists grasp the complexity of immigration today.

Thing Theory

Like Appadurai, Boym, and George, scholars in the humanities and social sciences in general have considered objects for what they disclose about history, society, nature and culture. In his book, *Fatal Strategies*, Jean Baudrillard criticizes the way in which objects have been rendered incomprehensible because they are considered “only the alienated, accursed part of the subject” (Baudrillard 112). Agreeing with Baudrillard, thing theorist Bill Brown, asserts the importance of “undoing the privilege of the subject,” and focusing on the things themselves. Baudrillard, Brown, and other scholars advocate treating the object as sovereign and deducing meaning from it instead of solely analyzing it in light of human subjects nearby. While we can treat objects as sovereign and analyze them separately from the human subject, this becomes more difficult to do when considering objects in transition. Though inanimate, objects can be moved, altered, consumed or set in motion by human subjects. Thus, many scholars believe that studying the trajectories of objects and the motion of things in turn illuminates the object’s human and social context.⁴

Another way objects are brought to life is through reading fiction. Description and narrative bring objects into motion, allowing us to study the objects’ trajectories and thus, their human and social context through fiction. Since we as human actors encode

⁴ On this position see Appadurai 5.

objects with significance, objects represent our selves: our identities, interactions and relationships. Similarly, objects come to embody our desires; they are tangible symbols of desired people, social statuses, and ways of life. I focus on immigration and apply thing theory to the objects that immigrants take with them in stories of migrancy. By doing so, I study the ways in which these objects are displayed or consumed by the immigrant and I interpret the way in which the immigrant views himself and his identity, as well as determine whether or not the consumption of the object produces the desired results and associations for the immigrant. The objects I examine fall into four different categories: luggage, domestic furnishings, religious artifacts, and intimate possessions. I begin with the objects that immigrants carry.

Luggage

In her essay “Traveling Light,” Rosemary George is interested in the objects and possessions the immigrants in fiction bring with them in the form of luggage. Following Rosemary George’s argument, luggage is presented in several of the novels as objects that symbolize the immigrant’s desire or rejection of assimilation. As George says, “in the literature of immigration and exile, there are scenes that (either lovingly, as a matter of fact, or in despair) catalogue the varied luggage that immigrants carry over” (George 173). While several of the novels present luggage as interpretable objects within the fiction, two of these novels categorize luggage in a different manner.

In *Anita and Me*, Meena’s parents feel the need to display their luggage on top of their bedroom wardrobes. Instead of hiding it in a closet or cellar, they keep it out in the open, as though it were an exhibit. In describing the luggage, Meena implies that her parents are not the only ones to showcase it. “I had always assumed this was some kind

of ancient Punjabi custom, this need to display several dusty, bulging cases overflowing with old Indian suits, photographs and yellowing official papers, as all my Uncles and Aunties' wardrobes were similarly crowned with this impressive array of luggage" (Syal 267). The luggage adorning the wardrobes symbolizes and connotes memory of the Kumars' life in India. As Meena says, "I had noticed that everything in those cases had something to do with India, the clothes, the albums, the letters from various cousins, and wondered why they were kept apart from the rest of the household jumble, allotted their own place and prominence, the nearest thing in our house that we had to a shrine" (Syal 267). Although Meena doesn't quite understand the significance of the luggage and memorabilia display, she is aware that it's something important and sacred and compares it to a place of worship. Similarly, the fact that the luggage is displayed in the bedroom also infuses it with significance, for the bedroom is a space designated for utmost intimacy. As Susan Stewart explains, "the actual locale of the souvenir is often commensurate with its material worthlessness" (Stewart 150). Placing the luggage in the bedroom suggests its intimate connotation and signifies its value.

In order to interpret this relationship and the significance of the luggage display, Svetlana Boym's essay "Diasporic Intimacy," in which she describes the decorations that cram and crowd the homes of Russian émigrés, is helpful. A similar crowdedness is apparent in the Kumars' "overflowing" and "bulging" suitcases. As Boym notes, crowdedness "becomes a synonym for coziness and intimacy." She explains that "each [immigrant] home, even [a] most modest one, is a personal memory museum" (516). The "bulging" compilation of the Kumars' objects symbolizes the collection of memories associated with India. However, while Boym discusses decorations that are displayed out

in the open on bookshelves and countertops, the Kumars' memorabilia is jammed inside the suitcases. The coziness and intimacy associated with this mass of memorabilia is tucked away and kept inside the luggage and apart from the rest of the house. The objects inside the cases symbolize the intimacy associated with home in India; as though the memories and intimacy are zipped up and prevented from mixing with the English house. The Kumars believe in preserving their intimacy and memorabilia as a way of keeping it sacred. Similarly, in displaying the suitcases as a "shrine," the Kumars are expressing the ways in which they value their past and identity and are portraying their longing for authentic intimacy and complete belonging.

The suitcases themselves represent the Kumars' displacement from India. As immigrants, they moved away from their home country and the suitcases represent their migrancy. The display of the suitcases symbolizes a sense of travel and homelessness, while the objects inside the cases symbolize the authentic intimacy that is kept separate from their English home. As Meena's mother simply explains to her "we just keep all the things in the cases that do not fit into these small English wardrobes, that is all" (Syal 267). Yet, this is not "all;" Mrs. Kumar's superficial answer fails to articulate the true motives behind keeping the luggage separate from their house. The Kumars' Indian objects and suitcases are not integrated into their English wardrobes, but rather are placed on top of the wardrobes. Their "Indianness" sitting on top of "Englishness" represents their lack of complete assimilation: their bags are always packed, as though they never feel completely settled. In preserving their Indian memorabilia and keeping it separate from their English wardrobes, they are safeguarding their Indian identity and are preventing themselves from fully assimilating. However, since the suitcases also

symbolize their displacement from India, the Kumars are distanced from their complete Indian identity. The suitcases bulging with Indian objects suggest that the Kumars do not fully fit in with either group. In leaving India, they have become deterritorialized, yet fail to become reterritorialized as English. They are essentially transnational and do not fully belong to either nation.

Unlike the Kumars, who value their luggage and see it as a symbol of their Indian identity, the main character in *The Impressionist* doesn't bring any sort of baggage with him in his travels, and rather, acquires objects and clothing pertaining to each identity that he assumes. In order to truly play the part of the characters he poses to be he must shed all objects and clothing associated with previous identities. As George explains, "forgetting the past, burning or burying it, creates the illusions of providing an escape route into the present that looks ahead rather than behind. Having discarded the luggage of the past, one can desire inclusion into the modern nation" (George 178). On his way to England, after stealing the luggage and identity of one Jonathan Bridgeman, the novel's eponymous hero believes his latest acquired belongings will facilitate his assimilation into English society. However, Jonathan is disappointed when he discovers his new belongings are nothing more than a "pitiful heap" of things. "His luggage was a disappointment to him, consisting of a trunkful of screw-top bottles of a brown spirituous liquid, and a second much smaller trunkful of dirty clothes. Apart from a tennis racket in a press, a rifle, ammunition, and the skull of some kind of deer, this constitutes his entire estate" (Kunzru 283). This luggage is worthless to Jonathan for it does not give the appearance of Englishness. Image is everything to Jonathan and he is even more upset when the old Jonathan's clothes do not fit him. "The worst of it is that the clothes do not

fit. The previous Bridgeman's waist was bigger. His feet were larger and his arms shorter. For an incarnation who cares particularly about tailoring, this is a torture" (Kunzru 283). Since the items are not his, they reflect nothing of his true identity. Yet the items also fail to reflect the Englishness that he desires. His "luggage" does not categorize him as Indian or English and therefore symbolizes his peripheral position in both societies.

Luggage in these novels represents the "unmooring of identities" which Sasson discusses and symbolizes the transnational identity of the immigrants. As a result of their migrancy the characters have become dislocated from their authentic homes, yet, have never fully assimilated into new societies. The immigrants' positions are difficult to classify; they exist somewhere in the middle, partially identifying with both nations.

Domestic Furnishings

Since the home is the site symbolizing familiarity and identity it is crucial to examine the objects within the homes of the immigrants in order to gauge their sense of self-definition. In studying immigrant homes, however, it is essential to recognize there is a level of inauthenticity to them. The immigrant house is the "home away from home;" the real "home" being the native country. Therefore, the "second home" as Svetlana Boym calls it, is the site of diasporic intimacy. "Diasporic intimacy is belated and never final," she explains.

Objects and places have been lost in the past, and one knows that they can be lost again. The illusion of complete belonging has been shattered. Yet, one discovers that there is still a lot to share. The foreign backdrop, the memory of past losses, and the recognition of transience do not obscure the shock of intimacy but rather heighten the pleasure and intensity of surprise (Boym 502).

Boym believes the “second home” “preserves many archeological layers of underground homemaking, fantasmic habitats, [and] clandestine spaces of escape and intimacy.” It is where “aesthetic and everyday practices become closely intertwined” (Boym 502). In considering this space of diasporic intimacy, it seems logical to examine objects that fill the rooms; objects that serve as aesthetic presentation pieces as well as domestic furnishings.

Turning to the fiction, the furnishings in the Kumars’ house are an eclectic mix of western working-class pieces and authentic Indian decorations: decorations, which Susan Stewart and Svetlana Boym would classify as “souvenirs.”

It was especially thrilling to welcome a new overweight relative to the house, who would invariably be received in our ‘front’ room with its tie-dye Indian hangings and brass ornaments, as opposed to the ‘lounge’, our telly and flop room next to it with its worn flowery suite and rickety dining table” (Syal 69).

Carried over with them in migration, these tie-dye hangings and brass ornaments act as souvenirs narrating the Kumars’ lives in India as well as their migration to England. As Boym suggests, the objects represent “a fragmentary biography of the inhabitant and a display of collective memory” (Boym 521-522). The tie-dye hangings and brass ornaments are mementos that evoke remembrance. Like Boym, Stewart believes these objects tell a narrative. Yet she also views souvenirs as objects around which nostalgia is anchored. “The souvenir speaks to a context of origin through a language of longing, for it is not an object arising out of need or use value; it is an object arising out of the necessarily insatiable demands of nostalgia” (Stewart 135). Stewart further describes nostalgia as a longing for the authentic experience. Displaying the Indian souvenirs

symbolizes Mr. and Mrs. Kumar's yearning for their former lives in India; they desire a genuine feeling of national belonging.

The location of the objects in the house is just as important as the objects themselves, and whether the pieces are displayed in the Kumars' "front" room or their "lounge" is a significant distinction. The Kumars' "front" room, in which they receive relatives, signifies an air of importance. Susan Stewart explains that front rooms, such as parlors or halls, are "rooms of a house [that] are tied to presentation in such a way that they exist within the temporality of everyday life" (Stewart 150). Placing the objects from India in this room then suggests a conscious construction of appearance and image. These objects, connoting authentic Indian identity and a longing for past experiences, are those with which the Kumars wish to be associated. The tie-dyed wall hangings and the brass ornaments are the objects in the house that are seen upon first entering, making them the objects upon which first impressions would be based.

As Boym explains, the souvenir objects "set the stage for intimate experiences," which makes the room in which these objects are placed a site of intimacy (Boym 522). Boym's theory holds true in the case of the Kumars' front room, for this is not only the room in which they hold dinners with the Uncles and Aunties, but also the room in which Meena's father tells stories of Partition and sings Punjabi love songs. Yet, Boym notes that "rooms filled with diasporic souvenirs...are oases of intimacy- away from the homeland and not quite in the promised land" (Boym 523). The front room is therefore a sanctuary somewhere between India and England: as a site of intimacy, it neither reflects English assimilation, nor does it give the feeling of "home" associated with India. The room becomes a space of deterritorialization: the objects and people within the room are

no longer completely associated with India, yet are also prevented from ever acquiring full English affiliation. Both the objects and people in the room fall between the terms of categorization and are somewhere in the middle.

The front room, which houses the souvenirs, can also be starkly contrasted to the Kumars' "flop" room. Instead of the Mughal miniature paintings, the tie-dye wall hangings, or the brass ornaments of the front room, the lounge houses more dilapidated objects. Instead of bold and vibrant souvenirs, the lounge consists of the "worn flowery" furniture and a "rickety dining table." The lounge serves as the English room of the Kumars' house. Unlike the brightly embroidered and shiny fabrics of Indian saris, the lounge furniture is dull and faded. The lack of color and vibrancy suggests that this room is not associated with India. Similarly, the furniture collection's flowery motif recalls typical English garden patterns, much different from the "yellow elephant" embroidery on Meena's *salwar kameez* suit (Syal 107). It becomes obvious that the lounge has English associations when the Kumars host *mehfils*, the parties for the Indian Uncles and Aunties in which the men would sing. Since the *mehfils* are very intimate nights connoting collective memory and belonging, the singing and events take place in the front room and the children are banished to the lounge. Therefore, being sent to the lounge suggests a separation from this collective Indian experience.

However, interesting to note is that the worn and rickety furniture of the lounge indicates excessive use and comfort, while the front room's mock leather settee, with its "symphony of leather farts and squeaks," indicates discomfort and formality. Although the authentic Indian objects are placed in the front room, its "mock" leather settee and the room's focus on presentation and "fronts," generates a sense of pretense. The placement

of the souvenir objects in the front room creates a contradiction, for the symbols of authentic experience are embedded within a room created for purposes of appearance. While these souvenir objects symbolize memories of, and longing for India, placing them in this room is the Kumars' attempt to uphold their image as authentic Indians and they are constructing the appearance of Indian precedence by furnishing the front room with these souvenirs. Again, this is the room that is seen upon first entering the house and is therefore filled with objects with which the Kumars wish to be identified. On the other hand, the back room with the broken-in couch and television seems to be where the "lounging" takes place, indicating a sense of ease and familiarity. Everyday living occurs in the lounge and the English furniture is frequently used. While the lounge is cut off from associations with India, the Kumars do not look down upon the room or the English furniture. Rather, the frequently used furniture suggests the Kumars' comfort with the English way of life just as their everyday "lounging" in this room shows a tendency towards English life. They are comfortable with this Englishness in their home. However, by having the English lounge in the back of the house they are attempting to play down their Englishness and are able to keep their Indian identity at the forefront. The mix of objects and furniture in the house, then, reflect the Kumars' transnationality. Rather than symbolizing a complete assimilation into English society, or a monopolized prolongation of Indianness, the objects, pertaining to both cultures, represent the Kumars' partial identification with both societies. While the souvenir objects symbolize the importance of maintaining an Indian identity, the worn floral furniture reflects the niche the Kumars are attempting to create in English society.

Similar to the Kumars' rickety English furniture, the Gangulis, in Lahiri's *The Namesake*, also have many "used" American items in their house.

Gogol has a room of his own, a bed with a built-in drawer in its base, metal shelves that hold Tinkertoys, Lincoln Logs, a View-Master, an Etch-A-Sketch. Most of Gogol's toys come from yard sales, as does most of the furniture, and the curtains, and the toaster, and a set of pots and pans. At first, Ashima is reluctant to introduce such items into her home, ashamed at the thought of buying what had originally belonged to strangers, American strangers at that. But Ashoke points out that even his chairman shops at yard sales, that in spite of living in a mansion an American is not above wearing a pair of secondhand pants, bought for fifty cents (Lahiri 52).

From this passage it is clear that the yard sale objects have a history that is significant to Ashima. The yard sale toys and furniture previously belonged to American children or American families; they represent American tastes, American hobbies, and American traditions. Purchasing these items represents an acquisition of an American way of life, something that Ashima is hesitant to acquire. Yet Ashoke reasons with her that all Americans shop at yard sales and there is nothing wrong if they do so as well. Ashoke sees no harm in giving in to the American way. By purchasing the yard sale items, they are acting like typical Americans, which sets the Gangulis apart from their family and friends in India. Not only are they now living in an American house, but they are acquiring an American lifestyle as well. However, Ashima's discomfort with purchasing the yard sale items indicates her reluctance to fully assimilate into America and her desire to preserve her Indian identity.

In the Ganguli's living room, amidst the yard sale furniture, "a watercolor by Ashima's father, of a caravan of camels in a desert in Rajasthan, is framed at the local print shop and hung on the wall" (Lahiri 52). This painting has been displaced from its original context in India and stands out in the living room filled with American furniture.

Removed from its origin and creator in India, the painting was framed at a local Massachusetts print shop and is now hanging on the wall of an American house. The painting's construction is a mix of both nations; the authentic Indian art with a New England frame symbolize its transnationality. While this painting indicates the Gangulis' preservation of Indian identity and heritage, it also serves as an object that hinders their assimilation into American society. With their strong tie to family and their Indian past, Ashoke and Ashima will never completely integrate and will invariably remain transnational like the painting.

Just as *Anita and Me* describes the Kumars' suitcases that are "bulging" and "overflowing" with objects and mementos, *Brick Lane* depicts the Ahmed's home in London to be overcrowded and congested as well. Yet, unlike the Kumars' suitcases that are crowded with Indian keepsakes, Nazneen and Chanu's living room is crammed with westernized furniture and wall decorations.

Chanu's books and papers were stacked beneath the table...there were three rugs: one red and orange, green and purple, brown and blue. The carpet was yellow with a leaf design. One hundred percent nylon and, Chanu said, very hard-wearing. The sofa and chairs...had little sheaths of plastic on the headrests to protect them from Chanu's hair oil. There was a lot of furniture, more than Nazneen had seen in one room before. Even if you took all the furniture in the compound, from every auntie and uncle's ghar, it would not match up to this one room. There was a low table with a glass top and orange plastic legs, three little wooden tables that stacked together, the big table they used for the evening meal, a bookcase, a corner cupboard, a rack for newspapers, a trolley filled with files and folders, the sofa and armchairs, two footstools, six dining chairs, and a showcase. The walls were papered in yellow with brown squares and circles lining neatly up and down. Nobody in Gouripur had anything like it. It made her proud. Her father was the second-wealthiest man in the village and he never had anything like it. He had made a good marriage for her. There were plates on the wall, attached by hooks and wires, which were not for eating from but only for display...[Chanu's] certificates were framed and mixed with the plates....Nazneen stared at the glass showcase stuffed with pottery

animals, china figures, and plastic fruit....She had everything here. All these beautiful things. (Ali 8).

With the patterned wallpaper and large collection of furniture, this room is incredibly chaotic and unsettling to the eye. However, Nazneen appreciates all her “beautiful things,” and is satisfied rather than unnerved in this room. Unlike her wealthy father’s house in Gouripur, this room is full of furniture and things. It pleases her to think she has more furniture than all of her aunties’ and uncles’ furniture combined. The crowded collection of furniture and things represents the wealth and success, into which Nazneen believes she has married. The things in this room symbolize her new life in London and convince Nazneen that she will be economically sound and happy in England.

The walls in the Ahmed’s living room are also very hectic with their geometric wallpaper and display of plates and framed certificates. As the Russian émigrés tell Svetlana Boym in her article, “On Diasporic Intimacy,” “émigrés can’t stand white walls.” Boym explains that “many [émigrés] cover such walls with wallpaper to domesticate them, or else decorate them exhaustively with as many tchotchkes as they can find,” for they “don’t want [their] room to look like a hospital” (Boym 516). To the immigrants, white walls are viewed as unwelcoming or institutional; bare walls are cold and impersonal. In order to feel more comfortable and “at home,” immigrants cover their walls and crowd their rooms. The crowded houses in these fictions represent the immigrants’ attempts to recreate the “coziness and intimacy” that was lost after leaving their homeland. By filling a home with many furniture pieces or decorations, the immigrants are trying to fill this void with material objects. As Boym clarifies, “from the perspective of absence, uprootedness, and exile,” immigrants long to recreate the cozy and overcrowded feeling of being home with family and friends.

Just as the Kumars' furniture and domestic objects represented their partial identification with both England and India, the furniture and objects in the Ahmed's living room also symbolize their transnationality. Theoretically, their living room is very "English" and westernized. With its wallpaper and plethora of furniture, it is unlike any room Nazneen has ever seen in Gouripur. The makeup of this room alone sets Nazneen and Chanu apart from their Pakistani people, for no one in Pakistan would have a living room such as this.

Unlike the Kumars who decorate their front room with Indian mementos and keepsakes, Chanu and Nazneen do not display any Pakistani objects in their living room. Chanu's certificate from Dahka University is the only object pertaining to the homeland; the rest of the room is full of westernized furniture and decorations. Even in their "stuffed" showcase, there aren't any Pakistani figurines or family photos. Instead, generic "pottery animals, china figures, and plastic fruit" are on display. By failing to incorporate their heritage and objects from their homeland into the décor, Chanu and Nazneen further separate themselves from Pakistan.

However, the typically "English" elements that make up this room, such as the "hard-wearing" "one hundred percent nylon" carpeting, or the plates hanging on the wall, "which were not for eating from but only for display" are foreign to Nazneen. The fact that Chanu must describe the carpet and plates with such specification to Nazneen indicates that she is unfamiliar with them. It seems odd for her to display plates rather than eat from them, and she was unaware that one hundred percent nylon carpet was hard-wearing. While carpeting and plates are not foreign to her, the carpet's composition and the way in which plates are used in this living room are. The carpet and plates also

yield a sense of artificialness. With the carpet's synthetic material, and the functional plates not serving a purpose, there is a contrived and unnatural aura to the English room that Chanu and Nazneen inhabit. Taking Svetlana Boym's article into account, it is as though the overcrowdedness of the room symbolizes Chanu and Nazneen's effort to overcome the artificial feeling, and to make the living room more intimate and homey. While the abundant furniture and lack of homeland memorabilia indicate Chanu and Nazneen's separation from their Pakistani identity, the artificialness of the living room and their yearning for intimacy portrayed by the room's overcrowdedness, indicate Chanu and Nazneen's partial English identity. They do not identify completely with either nation.

Just as in *Anita and Me*, and *Brick Lane*, the furnishing objects in *The Impressionist* are significant to examine, for they also indicate Jonathan's transnationality.

After the door of this room closes for the first time, he stands looking at the empty mantelpiece and the neatly blacked grate and the rug and the washstand with the square of speckled mirror hanging above it. Until this moment he has not thought about the contents of his new life. The life itself, *an English life*, was enough. The sight of all these empty things waiting for him to fill them up with himself, sends a knife of panic into his chest. He locks the door and slumps down against it. He has grabbed this life; he is an Englishman. But there are more requirements, things that hitherto have escaped his attention. The empty bookcase next to the bed. The dark square on the wallpaper where a picture once hung—where a picture is *supposed* to hang. What picture? What should be there? (Kunzru 291).

The objects in Jonathan's first room in London materialize and solidify his English life.

Whereas before he could only think of England in abstract terms, as he would a

“philosophical hypothesis, or a problem in geometry,” seeing the furniture forces him to

realize the tangibility of this new life. Similarly, they embody his desire of living an English life. Typical and empty, these objects and furnishings symbolize the unfinished quality of Jonathan's English life and represent the mold in which Jonathan is supposed to fill himself. The empty bookcase, mantelpiece and wall serve as structures of his new life; they are forms that every Englishman knows how to fill. They represent the common English house and way of life: ideals for which Jonathan yearns.

However, unlike the Kumars' suitcases that are "bulging" and "overflowing" with objects and mementos, Jonathan's room is completely empty of things, thus making him responsible for filling his room with his own belongings. Yet, since he did not bring any possessions or mementos from his past with him, and he's trying to hide his true identity anyway, Jonathan must acquire English objects that signify his alleged Englishness. As a phony Englishman, however, he has no idea how to go about filling the room with English objects and becomes terrified of getting the "requirements" wrong. Just as the hanging plates and synthetic carpet are foreign to Nazneen, English décor is alien to Jonathan. As a result, aside from the gilt-framed painting of George the Fifth which Jonathan purchases, he makes no attempt to fill his room with decorations or objects. His unfamiliarity with the English objects, his hesitancy of acquiring his own English objects, and therefore, his lack of objects all reflect Jonathan's incomplete assimilation into English society.

Jonathan's room is also the complete opposite of the immigrant houses Svetlana Boym describes. Bare and completely void of clutter and collectibles, his room does not evoke the coziness and intimacy associated with the overcrowded immigrant homes. Similarly, the objects that are in his room, such as the painting of the king, the rug, or the

black grate, do not symbolize past memories or authentic experiences like the Kumars' brass ornaments, or the *matreshka* dolls of the Boym's Soviet émigrés do. The furnishings of his room are generic English objects and do not symbolize a nostalgic longing for his homeland. He doesn't feel connected to the objects he acquires for his room; they do not create intimacy, they fail to symbolize his true past, and they reflect an assimilation that is merely partial. The objects denote Jonathan's own deterritorialization: he refuses to accept his Indian past, yet also fails to become completely English. He is left in between identities and cannot be categorized.

Religious Artifacts

Objects tied to religion are also crucial to examine in immigrant fiction, for religion can play an integral role in the way immigrants define themselves. Like all objects, religious artifacts also tell a narrative. This narrative not only describes the immigrant's past experiences, but also his beliefs and traditions. The nature of the artifact, how the immigrant interacts with it, and where the artifact is placed determine whether the immigrant is continuing with the religious practices he observed in his homeland, or whether he is modifying his practices in the new country. The religious artifacts represent either the immigrant's denunciation of religious practices in the new nation, or his desire to assimilate into the nation.

In *Anita and Me*, Meena's Auntie Shaila has a shrine on top of her refrigerator, which includes a handful of religious artifacts.

Auntie Shaila's shrine took up all of the top of her fridge, where Lord Rama and Shri Krishna and Ganesha, the plump, smiling elephant-headed god, my favorite, sat in miniature splendor, surrounded by incense sticks, *diyas*, fruit offerings and photographs of departed loved ones. I never saw mama or papa bow their heads in prayer or sing one of the haunting, minor

key *aartis* that Auntie Shaila would regularly perform with closed eyes and a long-suffering, beatific look, I suspect, for my benefit (Syal 93).

Auntie Shaila's miniature Hindi god statues are placed among the shrine's contents, serving as symbols of her Hinduism and her connection to India. In describing miniature objects, Susan Stewart explains "the miniature is often a material allusion to a text which is no longer available to us...its locus is thereby the nostalgic" (Stewart 60). The miniature statues therefore serve as a "material allusion" to Auntie Shaila's Hindu practices she observed in India. Living in England, Shaila is now detached from the authenticity of Hinduism in India. She no longer observes religious practices with her family, friends, and neighbors in a country where Hinduism is the dominant religion. As nostalgic religious artifacts, the statues represent the intimacy and sense of belonging she felt as a practicing Hindu in India. Shaila's connection to her homeland and authentic practices is now only partial. However, her religion also excludes her from ever fully assimilating into the dominantly Christian English society. The miniature statues not only symbolize her longing for past religious experiences and a sense of belonging, but also embody the obstruction of her assimilation.

Just as it was relevant to analyze the location in which the Kumars placed their brass ornaments and Indian hangings, it is also significant to examine the location of Shaila's shrine. Instead of in a bedroom or living room, the figurines stand on top of Shaila's kitchen refrigerator; a familiar place of daily use that is made more sacred as a result of the shrine. Just as the Kumars' front room was tied to presentation, Stewart believes the kitchen to be a room tied to function. Thus, the objects in the kitchen are intended for a specific use or purpose. Placing the shrine in the kitchen signifies that Shaila's prayers and offerings to the figurines are not just an act of worship. Rather, by

saying prayers and making offerings, she is *using* the figurines to reconnect with her past religious experiences in India and to acquire the sense of belonging she has lost.

However, because of the distance that now stands between Shaila and her homeland, she will never fully repossess this sense of belonging. Similarly her possession of the figurines prevents her from ever fully belonging to England.

Unlike the shrines and figurines present in *Anita and Me*, the religious objects in *Brick Lane* are subtler. The Ahmeds do not have any shrines or figures; however, they possess two editions of the Holy Qur'an, which are the central religious objects in the novel. Just as the location of Auntie Shaila's shrine was important, where Chanu and Nazneen keep their religious books is also significant. "Standing on the sofa to reach, [Nazneen] picked up the Holy Qur'an from the high shelf that Chanu, under duress, had specially built...She put the Qur'an back in its place. Next to it lay the most Holy Book wrapped inside a cloth covering: the Qur'an in Arabic. She touched her fingers to the cloth" (Ali 7,8). Both books of the Qur'an are stored on a high shelf that Nazneen forced Chanu to build. She forced her husband to build the shelf for no other purpose than to hold the books, which indicates the importance and value with which Nazneen regards them. The high placement also signifies the holiness and unearthliness of the books; they are raised above the earth for they are considered to be extremely sacred. The location of the books and the fact that Nazneen forced Chanu to build the shelf, suggests that at the beginning of the novel, Nazneen still regards her religion with great reverence even after leaving Pakistan and moving to England. Yet, later in the novel Nazneen is not consistently devout- she reads the Qur'an less frequently and she breaks the Islamic code of marriage by having an affair with another man. While her divergence from Islam

separates Nazneen from her former way of life in Pakistan, the presence and occasional use of the books ultimately keep her separated from the English Christian society. Further portraying this contradiction is the placement of the Qur'ans on the high bookshelf- while the high location of the books indicates esteem for the religion, it also suggests a sense of impracticality and limited use. The books are tucked away high above the levels of everyday life and Nazneen has to stand up on the sofa just to reach them- they are not easily accessible. While reading the Qur'an prevents Nazneen from identifying with England, her reading and use of the book is unregimented, which disconnects her from the complete Islamic devotion that she had in Pakistan.

However, at the beginning of the novel Chanu doesn't have the same admiration for his religion or the books. Not only did Nazneen force him into building a special shelf for the Qur'ans, but it is also revealed that Chanu does not pray, and "of all the books that he held in his hand [Nazneen] [has] never once seen him with the Holy Qur'an" (Ali 24). The Qur'an is not nearly as sacred to Chanu as it is to his wife in the beginning of the novel. Chanu's failure to practice Islam detaches him from his former life as a practicing Muslim in Pakistan. It is only after Chanu makes the decision to return to Pakistan later in the novel that he begins to read the Qur'an once again, thus indicating a connection between homeland and devout practice.

Whereas religious artifacts are possessions that are domestically displayed in *Anita and Me*, and sacredly tucked away in *Brick Lane*, the main character of *The Impressionist* does not possess any religious artifacts and has no intention to display any. As a character impersonating someone he is not, showing any implication of his true religious beliefs would be detrimental to his façade. However, at certain points along his

journey he interacts with religious artifacts, making it possible to interpret his former religious beliefs and therefore his true sense of self.

While living with the Macfarlanes, his Christian missionary family in the British sector of Bombay, Bobby is drawn further to the English way of life. After being mistaken for an Englishman, Bobby gains the confidence to converse with the whites and gets a thrill out of being in the places they congregate. He no longer wants to be the Macfarlane's "mongrel" specimen, but rather, wants to integrate with the English people in Bombay. In an attempt to make some money while surrounding himself with the whites, Bobby publicizes himself as a tour guide and leads groups of tourists around Elephanta Island.

Bobby takes them past the triple-headed Shiva at the entrance and shows them the hermaphrodite figure of the god, man on one side, woman on the other. He stands back as the women titter and the men make ribald jokes. Then discreetly, when they are not looking, he reaches forward and touches the stone for luck (Kunzru 249).

Although he has been emphasizing his Englishness by trading in his sandals for Argyll socks and black Oxford shoes and has been socializing with the whites, Bobby feels the need to touch the statue of the Hindu god for good luck. He is trying to shed the Indian half of his identity, yet still believes that touching the statue will bring him luck. The statue of the god is a religious artifact that symbolizes true Hindu heredity. As the son of Amrita, the primitive goddess-like Indian, Bobby is able to identify with the statue and authenticates himself as Hindu by touching the stone. Instead of walking by the statue with a total disregard for its supposed power, Bobby's action confirms his Hindu affiliation.

However, Bobby only touches the statue inconspicuously once no one is watching him and makes it a private confirmation. He would never touch the statue in public, for revealing his belief in the god's supposed power would shatter his front as a Christian Englishman. By touching the statue discreetly and affirming his true religious identity, Bobby acknowledges that he is not a true Christian and that he will never fully assimilate into the Christian community in England. Yet, by touching the statue only once no one is looking, Bobby recognizes the fact that he is uncomfortable with his Hindu identity and doesn't want to be associated with it. The statue represents Bobby's partiality to both religions: his Hindu roots will prevent him from ever becoming truly Christian and his Christian façade will forever thwart his acceptance of Hinduism.

Similar to Jonathan, the Gangulis, of *The Namesake*, do not possess any religious Hindi objects. However, unlike the Kumars or the Ahmeds, the Gangulis actually have and display objects that are tied to Christian holidays.

They learn ...to nail a wreath to their door in December, to wrap woolen scarves around snowmen, to color boiled eggs violet and pink at Easter and hide them around the house. For the sake of Gogol and Sonia they celebrate, with progressively increasing fanfare, the birth of Christ, an event the children look forward to far more than the worship of Durga and Saraswati...they hang stockings on the fireplace mantel, and set out cookies and milk for Santa Claus, and receive presents (Lahiri 64-65).

These objects- the wreath, dyed eggs, stockings, and presents- while not overtly religious themselves, represent cultural traditions associated with Christian holidays. While they do not symbolize the actual worshipping of Christ, the objects do imply the Gangulis' recognition of Christian culture and tradition. Just as buying the yard sale furniture implies the Gangulis purchasing an American way of life, their possession and interaction with these "Christian" objects indicates their acquiescence to American culture.

Possessing, creating and displaying these objects undeniably sets them apart from their former traditional Hindu practices they observed in India; the Gangulis are physically removed from India and have become “Americanized,” or essentially “Christianized,” as indicated by the Christmas wreath and dyed Easter eggs. Their compliance to these objects signifies the Gangulis’ lenience in upholding a devout Hindu home, and suggests their separation from strict Hindu religion and culture. Yet, because these objects do not symbolize a true worship of Christianity, the Gangulis are only associating with the surface aspects of the religion. They place the wreath on the outside of the door to *appear* more like Christian Americans, yet they worship Hindu Gods inside the house. They dye eggs and hang stockings because it is fun for the children, not because they religiously observe the holidays. This mere surface acceptance of Christianity is something that sets the Gangulis apart from their Christian neighbors. While they may permit the traditionally Christian objects in their home, the Gangulis will never convert to Christianity and it is this divergence from Christian American culture that prevents them from fully assimilating.

Intimate Possessions

Thus far I have examined objects, which, when observed or used by the immigrant, either evoke nostalgic feelings and memories or are representative of the new society in which they live. The consumption of these objects occurs in the observation or use of them and it is this consumption, which reminds the immigrants they are unlike the dominant society and prevent them from fully assimilating. Also relevant to examine are an immigrant’s personal possessions. These personal possessions can be wearable objects, such as jewelry or accessories, or even documented objects, such as certificates

or letters, which are cherished or savored by the immigrant. By wearing or handling these possessions the immigrant affirms his connection to the possession and feels as though he is associated with what it represents. Present in all of the novels, these personal possessions are important to the immigrant for they connote intimate feelings and memories or portray an image of who the immigrant wishes to be. These possessions are closely related to desire; they embody the desires of the immigrants and when worn or handled, make the immigrant feel as though he has achieved his intended objective.

In *Anita and Me*, Mrs. Kumar's diamond necklace is a souvenir object that she wears. Given to her by her mother as a wedding gift, the necklace evokes love and memories of her marriage in India. It is not only a symbol of her past in India but it also represents the bonds she feels to her family and homeland. The gold chain metaphorically links Mrs. Kumar to her mother, her husband, and to her experiences before immigration. When she believes her necklace is missing, Mrs. Kumar searches through the luggage on top of her wardrobe in an effort to find it. Like the other mementos in the suitcases, the necklace is an object that creates intimacy and reflects a nostalgic yearning for belonging. However, for Meena, the diamond necklace has a slightly different set of connotations.

For Meena, her mother's diamond necklace embodies Meena's desire to be a part of her parents' shared history. The necklace is a piece of *their* Indian experience; a part of their lives that occurred before Meena was even born. It is a piece of their lives of which she will never be a part. Just like the stories and anecdotes about which her relatives reminisce, the necklace represents a shared Indian history and a bond that excludes Meena. On the nights her relatives gather to sing Punjabi songs or tell stories, Meena feels incredibly distanced from them. "There was no point of me being there," she says,

“when I looked at my elders, in these moments, they were all far, far away” (Syal 72).

Born in England, Meena does not share her relatives’ uniting history of living in India; it is a land that is foreign to her and a land that separates her from her parents. By wearing her mother’s necklace she consumes these shared experiences and feels as though she becomes part of their history. By putting on the necklace Meena acquires a sense of belonging to her parents and their past lives. “I clutched mama’s gold chain to me like a talisman,” she says. “I could feel the diamond digging into my breastbone, a sharp sweet pain which reminded me I was still alive and breathing” (Syal 124). The necklace infuses a feeling of life into Meena, for it gives her a sense of complete history and fulfills her desire, making her feel as though she is a part of the shared Indian experience. Instead of feeling the need to fabricate her past, like she usually does, Meena feels complete while wearing the necklace.

However, the necklace also represents a piece of her heritage that sets her apart from Anita and the other children of Tollington. Just like her father’s Punjabi singing, the necklace represents something foreign, yet inherent in Meena.

Papa’s singing always unleashed these emotions which were unfamiliar and instinctive at the same time, in a language I could not recognize but felt I could speak in my sleep, in my dreams, evocative of a country I had never visited but which sounded like the only home I had ever known. The songs made me realize that there was a corner of me that would be forever not England (Syal 112).

Like the singing, the necklace serves to remind Meena that she is eternally connected to India. Despite the fact that it is a foreign land to her, India will always be part of her heritage, and this prevents her from ever truly belonging to England. The necklace then not only symbolizes an Indian past of which Meena will never be a part, but also symbolizes her failure at complete English integration.

Like the diamond necklace, Bobby's "enormous Curzon topi" in *The Impressionist* is a wearable object that also embodies desire. However, unlike the necklace, Bobby's hat is a fetish object and metonymically symbolizes the Englishman status he desires to acquire.⁵ For Bobby, a hat is the quintessential part of the English outfit. Functioning as shade for a pale complexion, the hat accessorizes the dapper English outfit while making one able to participate in the English greeting gesture of hat tipping. Bobby believes the hat also represents an acceptance into English society and a sense of belonging; two things which he is lacking before he purchases his hat. "Bobby often finds himself lost...No one else takes an interest in him. He belongs to no group or gang. There is nothing much he feels connected with at all" (Kunzru 236).

However, after being mistaken for a hatless white man by another Englishman, Bobby is overjoyed and feels it's necessary to buy an object that signifies English acceptance. Once wearing the hat, "which sits on his head like a minor classical monument," Bobby strolls along the city, tipping his hat to English people. He finally feels as though he is a part of their group and begins to hang out at their hangouts, engaging them in conversations. As soon as he bought the hat, Bobby symbolically cut ties with his Indian identity; he bought a piece of English identity and separated from his Indianness.

The hat is also the catalyst that initiates Bobby's fabrications about his English heritage. Unlike the necklace, which gives Meena a sense of belonging and prevents her from fabricating her past, owning the hat causes Bobby to lie even more. The hat forces

⁵ In his essay, "Longing for Sleeve Buttons." Andrew Miller examines the fetishistic and metonymical associations of commodities. Miller discusses the way in which sleeve buttons symbolized wealth and high status in the Victorian era. The peasants of the Victorian age desired this wealth and therefore desired sleeve buttons for what they embodied.

Bobby to attempt to play up his Englishness: he feels the excessive need to create various English personas, construct various personal histories, and tell various stories about being English. However, Bobby's complete Englishness is fake. As the son of Indian goddess Amrita, Bobby will never have a completely authentic English history. The hat creates a paradox for Bobby. Not only does it embody what Bobby desires to be, but it also symbolizes a status that we will never achieve: the authentic Englishman. Since the hat represents both his denunciation of Indian identity and the unfeasibility of becoming an authentic Englishman, it symbolizes Bobby's failure at fully fitting into either identity group. He is left deterritorialized and somewhere in the middle ground between the two identities.

Just as Bobby's hat depicts an image of how he'd like to be viewed, Chanu Ahmed's framed certificates in *Brick Lane* represent the intellectual persona he so desires. Indicating his degree in English literature from Dhaka University and the completion of other courses in England, the certificates are mementos representing Chanu's education and achievements. They are personal possessions that tangibly reflect his dream of holding an intellectual status and correspondingly, Chanu takes these documents down from the wall by the end of the novel when he relinquishes this dream. Yet while Chanu still has faith in his dream, these documents bring value to his life and he proudly displays them on the living room wall. As Susan Stewart explains, "because of its connection to biography and its place in constituting the notion of the individual life, the memento becomes emblematic of the worth of that life and of the self's capacity to generate worthiness" (Stewart 139). The certificates are directly related to Chanu's self-worth; the more certificates there are on the wall, the more important and valuable he

feels. Similarly, with each new certificate he hangs, Chanu feels closer to becoming an English intellectual. He is obsessed with these certificates, for they represent his progression to the status he desires.

He took down his framed certificates and explained them to her. ‘This one is from the Centre for Meditation and Healing in Victoria Street. Basically it is a qualification in transcendental philosophy. Here’s the one from Writer’s Bureau, a correspondence course. I applied for some jobs as a journalist after that. And I wrote some short stories as well...Now *this* is not actually a certificate as such. It’s from Morley College evening classes on nineteenth-century economic thought, and it’s just directions to the school, but that’s all they gave out. No certificates. Here’s my mathematics A level. That was a struggle. This is cycling proficiency, and this is my acceptance letter for the IT communications course- I only managed to get to a couple of classes.’ He talked and she listened. Often she had the feeling that he was not talking to her; or rather that she was only part of a larger audience for whom the speech was meant. He smiled at her but his eyes were always searching, as if she were a face in the crowd singled out for only a moment (Ali 24).

While the certificates do signify his accomplishments, Chanu makes those accomplishments well know to everyone. He does so not only by displaying them on the wall, but also by explaining each and every certificate to Nazneen and his visitors. Chanu *needs* the certificate in order to feel he accomplished something and in order to prove his value to other people. For example, he frames a certificate for cycling proficiency despite the fact that it is not an “intellectual” certificate in order to make himself appear more distinct and important. Even though he never received an *actual* certificate from Morley College, he still frames and displays the only thing the college gave out- the directions to the school. He also frames an acceptance letter for an IT course because he never finished all the classes to receive an actual certificate. Yet, since the acceptance letter shows that he took the classes (even if it was only a few classes), he feels the need to hang it. For Chanu, displaying the memento is more important than simply knowing he took the

course or telling someone he took the course. He believes the framed certificates as well as the framed directions and acceptance letter are tangible proof of his intellectual worth and achievement and he needs everyone to physically see and recognize his accomplishments. As later portrayed in the novel, Chanu's intellectual front is essentially masking the personal failure he feels in England. After moving to England Chanu goes through a handful of jobs and professions and is never financially successful. Therefore, his display of certificates is an attempt to convince himself and others that he is not a failure.

Chanu's framed certificates also represent his separation from Pakistan. Apart from his Dhaka University certificate, these documents symbolize his English education and his relocation to England, showing that he is no longer fully connected to his homeland. Yet, while they symbolize his disconnection to Pakistan, the documents fail to include Chanu in the category of English intellectuals. Chanu only has one certificate signifying an actual university degree; the rest are his framed directions and acceptance letter, or certificates from smaller bureaus or centers. Even though Chanu thinks of each document as an actual degree, not all of the documents are legitimate, which prevents Chanu from becoming a true English intellectual. The certificates essentially represent Chanu's in between identity: he is disconnected from Pakistan, and is never incorporated into the English group of which he so desires to be a part.

While Mrs. Kumar's necklace and Jonathan's hat are accessory objects that symbolize their desires, Ashima Ganguli's prized possessions are to be read rather than worn. However, like the necklace and hat, as well as Chanu's certificates, Ashima's readable possessions also represent her longings.

[Ashima] has saved her dead parents' letters on the top shelf of her closet, in a large white purse she used to carry in the seventies until the strap broke. Once a year she dumps the letters onto her bed and goes through them, devoting an entire day to her parent' words, allowing herself a good cry. She revisits their affection and concern, conveyed weekly, faithfully, across continents- all the bits of news that had had nothing to do with her life in Cambridge but which had sustained her in those days nevertheless (Lahiri 160-161).

The letters from her now deceased parents are Ashima's most valued possessions, for they reconnect her to her family and previous life in India. The letters, like Mrs. Kumar's diamond necklace, connote memories of people and places of the land in which Ashima once lived. After first moving to America, Ashima read and consumed the letters in order to live vicariously through them. The weekly letters provided her with updates of home, keeping her informed and connected to India and her old life. However, after her parents pass away and the letters stop arriving, Ashima stores them in an old purse in the top of her closet. Ashima keeps the letters in the "broken" and essentially useless purse, thus symbolizing her "broken" ties to her country and family now that her parents are deceased. However, although her animate connection to India has been broken, the written words of her parents' letters keep Ashima forever connected to India. As Susan Stewart explains, "writing contaminates; writing leaves its trace, a trace beyond the life of the body...writing promises immortality, or at least the immortality of the material world in contrast to the mortality of the body...if writing is an imitation of speech, it is so as a 'script,' as a marking of speech in space which can be taken up through time in varying contexts" (Stewart 31). The actual script of the letters immortalizes the people, places and events about which her parents have written. By reading the letters, Ashima is animating them, making the people and memories come alive once again. While the letters indicate her separation and departure from India, they also signify her immortal

ties to her native country. It is this immortal tie that ultimately prevents Ashima and the Gangulis from fully integrating into American society.

By examining luggage, domestic furnishings, religious artifacts, and intimate possessions in these novels, I have shown what the study of things can tell us about how immigrant characters adapt religious practices, relationships to the homeland, and dreams of the new nation in order to find a place in the middle ground. While the furnishings and possessions they brought with them indicate strong connections to home, well-used “Western” furniture, carpets, and toys show they have allowed the new nation to infiltrate their lives. Through the examination of these objects, the transnationality of the immigrants is illuminated: they identify with the lifestyles and objects of both nations. Compliance with transnationality and a capacity to adapt within this middle ground are characteristics of immigrants that have developed in literature within the last ten years. Like recent sociological writings on immigration, fiction no longer depicts immigration as a process of moving from point A to point B just as it no longer portrays immigration as a process of cutting connections with the homeland in order to assimilate. As immigration has evolved, the genre has progressed as well. The fiction simultaneously illuminates the immigrants’ ties to the homeland and their submission to a new lifestyle. While they are awkwardly situated between “home” and the new nation, they have consented, adjusted and made a place for themselves. As the literary objects I focused on indicate, fiction narrates the immigrants’ middle ground. They tell the story of the grey space between authentic experiences and assimilation to which the immigrants have resigned themselves.

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