

Artifacts of Identity: Navigating Cultural and Psychological Paralysis in Marj Gurasich's *Letters to Oma* and Bharati Mukherjee's *Jasmine*

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*The journey to novel territorial borders promises an enduring battle of adaptation, retention, and reinvention of immigrants' cultural identities and orientations. Immigrants have no choice but to readjust to the demands of the new culture while preserving aspects of their former identities. Physical artifacts help immigrants survive and function as markers of their cultural identity and psychological experiences, as seen in Marj Gurasich's *Letters to Oma* and Bharati Mukherjee's *Jasmine*. Key objects such as Prakash's suitcase, letters, and the cuckoo clock symbolize cultural retention and readjustment for Christina and Jasmine. The immigrants forge and establish emotional and psychological connections with these objects to navigate the challenges of relocation and cultural displacement. Jasmine and Christina succeed in a foreign land because of their concurrent shedding of and dependency on these artifacts, which offer solace and a sense of home amidst the psychological struggles immigrants face in assimilating and retaining aspects of their identities. The artifacts not only specify the immigrants' shifting identities, but also indicate their resistance and preservation of their cultural identities. Ultimately, material culture signifies personal histories and narratives of identity renegotiation and acculturation.*

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Introduction

Marj Gurasich's *Letters to Oma* (1989) and Bharati Mukherjee's *Jasmine* (1989) feature a myriad of artifacts that signify the retention and transformation of the cultural identities of immigrants. Naturally, artifacts convey unique inferences to different people in diverse contexts depending on factors such as social class, cultural disposition, and sociolinguistic traits.¹ As social actors, humans assign significance to objects to make sense of the environment and form new identities through their interactions with them. Arjun Appadurai (1986) in *The Social Life of Things* points out that objects gain meaning through "human transactions, attributions and motivations," as well as the "concrete, historical circulation of things... inscribed in their forms, their uses, their trajectories." Constant interactions with objects often lead to the development of intense emotional and psychological attachments to them. Humans value objects like flowers, houses, and so on, as they

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¹In the case of the convergent settings of Gurasich's *Letters to Oma* and Mukherjee's *Jasmine*, Christina's family and Jasmine transition from the German and Indian cultures, respectively, to the United States of America, typically described as the land of opportunities and freedom.

have socially validated intrinsic and extrinsic appeal. The historical production and stylistic features of objects significantly influence and shape people's views and interactions with them (Judge et al. 2020).

Therefore, unfamiliar or novel situations present an uncomfortable feeling, as they challenge our ability to relate to the objects in those places. Accordingly, it is normal for people to rely heavily on familiar artifacts to survive and "remember our personal past" (Heersmink 2021). Over time, our continuous interactions with these objects in a new culture ultimately shift our worldview and cultural orientation. The disconnection from our previous culture gradually prompts us to shed some objects and retain aspects of our cultural identities. As much as artifacts that satisfy physiological needs are vital, the familiar artifacts the immigrants bring with them give them emotional stability, preserve their memories and identities, prevent cultural erasure, and spur them on to achieve their ambitions.

Despite facing their fair share of criticism, both novels vividly capture the challenges immigrants encounter and portray their resilience in the face of adversity. Although Mukherjee in 1980 faced depression during her movement to America due to the "losses and gains of migration and a consequent ambivalence of her North American Status" (Maxey 2019), and a negative reaction from commentators and critics who critique her contentious and opinionated perspective on hybridity and cultural identity, her novel, *Jasmine*, has received numerous scholarly probe, "an unusually wide readership" (Maxey 2019), and an ovation for "her remarkable success in forging a coherent vision out of the chaos of her multiple displacements; and her ability to articulate that vision in a voice that is as subtle as it is insistent, as graceful as it is provocative" (Nelson 1993). Comparatively, it is no coincidence that Gurasich's novel, *Letters to Oma*, received an award for its "significant contributions to Western Heritage" (*Western Heritage*). Even though it falls within the juvenile book genre and has received less scholarly consideration, its implications extend beyond this modest categorization. It addresses broader, more mature themes such as identity preservation and acculturation that novelists epitomize in narratives like Mary Ellis' *The Bohemian Flats*, Julia Alvarez's *How the Garcia Girls Lost Their Accent*, and Mario Puzo's *Fortunate Pilgrims*.

Physical objects are symbolic markers of identity retention, assimilation, and transformation in Gurasich's *Letters to Oma* and Mukherjee's *Jasmine*. Artifacts such as the Cuckoo Clock, the letters, and Prakash's suitcase represent Christina and Jasmine's shifting cultural identities. The novels explicitly show how objects retain or alter the characters' experiences as they negotiate through the hardships of immigrating from Germany and India to the land of opportunities, the United States of America. Christina's family immigrated from a German culture that was, at the time, marked by a rally for "German unity and a constitutional government with freedom of speech and trial by jury" (Gurasich 1989), while Bharati Mukherjee's *Jasmine* was set in a postcolonial Indian society defined by communal ownership, rigid gender roles, and supernatural belief systems. Many reasons compel people to leave their homelands, the cultural fabric that has shaped their identities since childhood, in search of greener pastures. When they eventually move, they take a few of their belongings, including money, clothes, and kitchenware, that hold memories of how far they have come. Arriving in an unfamiliar place requires

substantial behavioral and social adjustments to fit in and survive under the harshest and most unforgiving conditions. The characters in the novels use, leave behind, and cling to artifacts that specify their cultural disposition and ongoing transformation.

Both immigrant novels explore the characters' identity changes and resilience as their challenging circumstances compel them to migrate to the US. Gurasich's *Letters to Oma* focuses on a German family, the von Scholls, who immigrate to Texas to escape the government-issued arrest of Max von Scholl due to his protest papers. Sustained by the 16-year-old protagonist's letters and clock, Christina Eudora von Scholl and her family navigate challenges as their arrival in a foreign land tests their tenacity and grit. Similarly, Jasmine fulfills her deceased husband's ambition after his untimely death, which coincided with his plans to study in the US. Jasmine commences this journey with the intent of incinerating her husband's suitcase at his school. She undergoes significant identity changes as she sheds and retains her possessions. Mukherjee (2011) makes a weighty statement that immigration represents "a loss of community, of language, and of extended family. It is to give up on the dream of a better future in one's home country. It is to cut oneself off from history and to condemn oneself to a world of ghosts and memories." Therefore, the immigrants' artifacts serve as a reassuring connection to their former lives and a tangible reminder of their survival.

Literature Review

Immigrants' Cultural Displacement, Liminality, and Survival

Christina and Jasmine reflect the agency and willingness to survive and flourish in a foreign land, as indicative of successful immigrants. Both immigrants attempt to navigate physical and emotional challenges and adapt to a new culture through the artifacts that they bring with them. Just like Madelaine Hron (2018) argues in "The Trauma of Displacement" about immigrants, Christina and Jasmine frequently encounter significant "psychological and physical disorders" as they acclimatize to an unfamiliar environment. They face "a wide variety of [traumatic] experiences" (Caruth 1991) that leave lasting impacts on their well-being as they transition to a new place. Unlike those emerging from war or life-threatening circumstances, they might not exhibit grave "post-traumatic effects" (LaCapra 2014). However, Jasmine, as well as Christina's family, is often exposed to "quotidian and chronic experiences such as isolation, alienation, discrimination, poverty or violence" (Hron 2018). Ultimately, they had to choose to perish, subsist, or overcome this challenge. As immigrants, Jasmine and the Scholls had the liberty "to assimilate or to disassociate from the prevailing discourse" (van der Spuy 2018). Some immigrants, like Jasmine and Christina, adjust and cope "with these possible stressors" (Hron 2018) due to their dependency or desertion of certain artifacts. Although their existence in a "third space" (Bhabha 1994), or a "state of twin identities and binary thinking" (Hron 2018), considerably impacts their identity formation and preservation, the immigrants exemplify the tenacity to thrive in a foreign land through the negotiation of struggles with the objects they carry, discard, and encounter on their journey.

Theoretical Framework

Beyond their mere physicality or dictionary meaning, the artifacts in the novels, created through the immigrants' constant interactions, reflect metaphorical connotations and require a consideration of their contextual meaning. Bill Brown's (2001) "Thing Theory" explains how humans should not merely perceive things as objects, but more importantly, we should consider the "social life" and the "evolution of things." The "potency" of things unifies humans' "private and public affection [towards them]" (Brown 2001). Hence, it would be an oversight to interpret the artifacts within the novels through narrow or stereotypical definitions by viewing Prakash's suitcase merely as a means of transport or Christina's clock solely as a timekeeping device. These artifacts represent the shifting cultural identities of the immigrants. Therefore, rhetorical considerations should address the function they play, especially concerning "the subject-object relation in particular temporal and spatial contexts" (Brown 2001). Humans are naturally inclined to "shape, code, and recode the material object world," and "make things meaningful and valuable" (Brown 1999). Thus, the artifacts, such as the ships and the clock, fulfill different functions depending on their connection to the characters. Consequently, although "human actors encode things with significance," they can only understand the objects' implications when they perceive and think of them as "things-in-motion" to comprehend their role in "human and social context" (Appadurai 1986). In economic terms, Karl Marx (1867) contends that we can discover the "use value" of things through the "work of history" or "socially recognized standards of measure." Therefore, for a thing to possess "use value," it must have an "abstract human labour embodied or materialized [in it]" (Marx 1867). The value of Jasmine and Christina's artifacts depends on the expended resources and the invested labor, as well as their historical circulation and contextual significance, as they are "portals to cultures and behaviors of the past" (Scarpaci 2016).

Material Culture as Identity Specifiers

Material culture reveals the changing identities of Christina and Jasmine. The artifacts in the novels shape the immigrants' self-perception and cultural belonging as they navigate the tensions of living in a new culture. Scholarly accounts point out the significant correlation between material culture and the formation of self and cultural identity (Appadurai 1986, Brown 2001, Heersmink 2021). Rebecca D'Arcy (2015), in her article, "Identity, Material Culture and 'Thing Theory' in Two British Migrant Novels," examines the role of objects in shaping "identity formation" and "conceptions of selfhood" in Hanif Kureishi's *The Black Album* and Monica Ali's *Brick Lane*. Similar to Christina's clock and Prakash's suitcase, "material culture and inanimate objects" lead to the development of liminal and fragmented identities that are representative of immigrants in the "diaspora" (D'Arcy 2015). Through Homi Bhabha's third space theory and Brown's Thing Theory, as well as Stuart Hall's ideas on cultural identity and Literature, D'Arcy (2015) points out that objects such as clothing, books, and newspapers reveal "contradictions between Eastern and Western Culture." These objects also signify an immigrant's "moral dissipation," as his possession of them makes him neither Asian nor Western; therefore, he has an

“unstable,” “fractured [identity]” (D’Arcy 2015). Man Yiu (2018) supports D’Arcy’s argument that culinary objects, such as “Lychees,” connect with immigrants’ experiences and portray their nostalgia and fragmentation as hybrid individuals. Similar to the ships that Jasmine and Christina go aboard, objects can be restrictive on the immigrant’s “physical freedom,” as the immigrant cannot break loose from the “harsh and threatening” realities, nor disentangle her “personal life” from the influence of the “outside world” (D’Arcy 2015). Therefore, it is not only possible to “map out the life of the immigrant in literature through a cartography of objects” (D’Arcy 2016), but also, it is undeniable that objects reveal the changing identities of Jasmine and Christina’s family. Equivalent to D’Arcy and Yiu’s argument about hybridity, the immigrant novels express the preservation and changes that Jasmine and Christina undergo through the artifacts they possess.

Although people travel abroad for exclusive reasons, artifacts like Prakash’s suitcase compelled Jasmine to journey to a new territory and reinvent her identity. Timothy Ruppel (1995) argues that Prakash’s suit was the “‘mission’ that controlled her [Jasmine’s] journey to the United States.” Jasmine initially planned to burn the suit, and also, in the process, “cremate herself” (Olson 2008). Jasmine’s act of burning “Prakash’s suit” along with her “Indian clothes” signifies her ability to “break the chain of causality” (Ruppel 1995) that resulted in her unfortunate sexual defilement. The uncertainty of the immigrant experience reflects how an artifact like the suit that prompted Jasmine’s immigration to the US also led to an adverse outcome. Although Jasmine survived at the hands of Half-Face, her association with the artifact simultaneously evokes both hope and hardship. While Ravichandran and Deivasigamani (2013) argue that Jasmine failed as she tried to “separate herself from all that is Indian and forget her past completely,” as her former identities “emerged in specific moments” to “exacerbate the tension,” Ruppel’s (1995) argument that the novel discourages cultural “preservation, stasis, and attachments,” and instead embraces reinvention and adaptation more accurately describes Jasmine’s identity shifts. Sanja Čukić (2016) draws attention to the contradiction between the diaspora account in the “letter” that Professorji wrote to Prakash and the “reality” of his family’s backwardness, as they are “completely locked away from life in America due to his [family’s] unwillingness to accept their new home or let go of the past.” Jasmine describes it as an “artificially maintained Indianness” (Mukherjee 1989), since “they let nothing go, lest everything be lost” (Mukherjee 1989). Ruppel and Olson make a compelling case that Prakash’s suitcase is the key reason for Jasmine’s journey; however, it is irrefutable that Professorji’s letter is the preliminary, underlying catalyst for Jasmine’s immigration.

Identity Reinvention as a Non-Negotiable Endeavour

In addition, in her quest to survive in a new culture, Jasmine had no choice but to adapt to the American culture. Scholars who interpret Jasmine’s assimilation into the American culture and retention of her Indian heritage come from three schools of thought. While scholars like Inderpal Grewal (2005) question Jasmine’s full integration into American culture, pointing out her neglect and negative framing of her Indian heritage, others like Asha Nadkarni (2012) claim that Jasmine was “never actually Indian at all.” Critics, such as Erin Ninh (2013), refute her complete

“assimilation” into the American culture. Ninh (2013) suggests that her “perpetual liminality” supersedes it, while Susan Koshy (2004) claims that Jasmine was only reinventing herself to fit the “demography of the dominant group [the American culture]” instead of “an alternative vision of Americanness.” Suchismita Banerjee (2012) emphasizes Jasmine’s refusal to accept the “paralysis of exilic consciousness” by fully engaging with the cultural diaspora of America to forge a new identity. On the other spectrum, Henriette-Juliane Seeliger (2020) argues that Jasmine did not perceive homeland as a “pre-existing place” that requires protection. Jasmine not only adapts to fit the culture of the new land but also ultimately influences the “land and its cultural meanings” (Seeliger 2020). My argument tilts towards Seema Sharma’s (2020) emphasis on Jasmine’s attempt to “demolish her past except for occasional memories of Prakash,” and Banerjee’s (2012) claim that the novel develops “ambiguous sites of identity performance,” where Jasmine has no choice but to be both “complicit and resistant” to the demands of the American culture. Jasmine had to prioritize her survival in a foreign land over anything else. As much as she recognized that she had to let go and also maintain aspects of herself that drew her to her past, including the artifacts that linked her to her husband, she had to adapt to the American way of life successfully. The immigrant journey requires an acculturation to the culture of the new land and a retention of aspects of the former culture. Unlike Jasmine, Christina’s family reflects Ninh’s claim as they concurrently retained aspects of their German culture and integrated into the American way of life; thus, they reflect Bhabha’s hybrid identities.

Artifacts as Survival Outlets

Jasmine’s ability to survive was contingent on the functional load of specific artifacts, particularly their commercial worth. Jasmine’s hair initially assured her of fitting into the American culture due to the artifact’s economic exchange value. Reddy (2013) emphasizes the cultural and economic significance of “Indian women’s hair” within the “transnational economy.” Indian women’s hair has a touch of “virginity and innocence,” which is comparatively better than the American alternative that depends on artificial ingredients like “shampoos” and “dyes” (Reddy 2013). The transactional exchange value of Jasmine’s hair is used as collateral for Professorji to promise Jasmine access to a green card. Although Jasmine’s attractive hair offers her a temporary sense of liberation within the country, it also functions “as the raw material for the imperial nation-state’s biopolitical surveillance” (Reddy 2013). Her beauty represents a promise of national inclusion linked to its worth, but it also indicates Jasmine’s potential marginalization as a racialized immigrant. Though Reddy makes a relevant claim that, even if Jasmine does her best to assimilate into the American culture by securing a green card, her biological features make her subject to racial profiling, it is evident, as my arguments prove, that Jasmine successfully integrated into the American way of life. Interpretations of Mukherjee’s *Jasmine* extensively address issues of race (Filipczak 2017), feminism (Bhattacharya 2019, Nadkarni 2012), identity formation (Carter-Sanborn 1994, Koshy 2004), and “cosmopolitanism” and “immigrant consciousness” (Grewal 2005, Grewal 1993). Although, scholars like Ruppel (1995), Olson (2008) and Reddy

(2013) emphasize that various artifacts, such as Prakash's suit and documents, are pivotal to Jasmine's immigration and adaptation to the American culture, research on both immigrant novels has not specifically explored how these artifacts reveal the identities and orientations of immigrants as they navigate a third space, where they must adapt, resist, and reinvent themselves.

Textual Discussion

Artifacts as Markers of Identity

In both novels, physical artifacts, such as Christina's clock and Prakash's suitcase, reveal the immigrants' cultural identity and represent their limitless ambition and resilience. Christina's Cuckoo clock, gifted to her by her Oma, represents her bond to her former identity. Her custody of the ornamental clock is a nostalgic connection to her Oma and her German culture. The clock is "the most exquisitely carved wooden clock Tina had ever seen. Its warm dark wood was shaped into vines intertwined with flowers and leaves of ivy, carved with the finest craftsmanship" (Gurasich 1989). The clock's design evokes a feeling of wonder and grandeur, as Christina recalls her thrilling interactions with her Oma. Moreover, the clock's qualities, especially its intricate craftsmanship, are a cue to the distinguished social class to which they belonged before her family departed from Germany, which contrasts with the uncertain future that awaited them in the new land. The value of the clock manifests not only in its historical narrative, which details its significance to her Oma, but also in the context of farewell, disconnection, and solitariness within which Christina receives it. Christina's Oma mentions that "many years ago... [Christina's] Grandfather Lembke worked for a clockmaker. He made this little clock for me. It is my dearest possession, packed away these many years" (Gurasich 1989). The antique context of how Christina's Grandfather made the clock solely for her Oma leads to the unpleasant realization that Christina is leaving her behind. The clock and the delightful memories they shared are the only reminders she has of the love and tenderness of her Oma, whom she "would soon leave behind, probably never to see again" (Gurasich 1989). At this moment, Christina perceives the clock as an indelible part of her identity, as it represents everything she stands for as a German and as a descendant of the von Scholls.

The "lovely, delicate clock" (Gurasich 1989) functions as Christina's emotional therapist amid the psychological trauma of disconnection. Every tick of the clock reminds Christina of her Oma and bridges the distance between them. It gives her the unrequited solace she desperately seeks from her mother. Thus, Christina's instinctive, valiant act to extend "her free arm" as she "reached out and rescued her little clock" (Gurasich 1989) from sinking in the river indicates her emotional attachment to the clock and depicts the clock as a symbol of home and comfort amidst the chaos of her family's adventure. Christina, after receiving the clock from her Oma, makes a promise to herself that "She must learn the new ways and face the dangers of the new life, but she mustn't forget the old. Especially her dear Oma" and "she vowed then, no matter what hardships or dangers might await them, she

would never, never part with Oma's last gift to her" (Gurasich 1989). The pledge Christina makes is representative of every human's predisposition, as we attach deep emotions to the artifacts we possess. Her unparalleled emotional attachment to the clock is evident in the therapeutic effect it has on her. The touching account that "if she had not had her little Oma's clock, she would have been lonesome" (Gurasich 1989) suggests that the alienating effects of Christina's journey require that she rely on certain artifacts for comfort and respite. The clock becomes more than just a time teller; it is a lifeline that connects Christina to her heritage. Immigrants often rely on these artifacts as sources of consolation in the face of constant struggles to readjust in a world that can feel alien and unwelcoming.

Similarly, Prakash's suitcase functions as a propeller of ambition and a source of identity formation. Jasmine moved to the United States to fulfill her husband's unmet educational ambition (Ruppel 1995, Olson 2008). The suitcase holds Prakash's aspirations and the sacrifices he has made to achieve his dream of studying in the US. Jasmine describes the suitcase as smelling "of some new man-made material. Inside it was just one thing: a neatly folded light blue Teriwool suit with a label, BABUR ALI/MASTER TAILOR/JULLUNDHAR, on the sleeve" (Mukherjee 1989). The suitcase had just one thing before Jasmine traveled—a Teriwool suit; however, her identity becomes lumped together with the aspirations of her deceased husband when she puts her belongings in the same suitcase. Jasmine resolves to offer a memorial to her husband, saying, "I thought, we had created life. Prakash had taken Jyoti and created Jasmine, and Jasmine would complete the mission of Prakash. Vijh & Wife. A vision had formed" (Mukherjee 1989). Her husband's vision in the suitcase represents a fragile, newborn baby that she has to nurture with utmost dedication. She makes this promise by saying, "I promised, I said. 'It is my mission to bring my husband's suit to America. I am taking it to his school and burning it where we were going to live'" (Mukherjee 1989). Jasmine's goal to burn her husband's suit was the ultimate motivation that empowered her to commence this arduous journey filled with uncertainties. When Jasmine mentions that she is "a village girl, going alone to America, without job, husband, or papers?" (Mukherjee 1989), she meant that she did not have a goal of her own and that she only embarked on the laborious journey to fulfill her husband's dreams. It is undeniable that one does not need a husband or even a job to go to America. Thus, the suppressed remnants of her husband's vision in the suitcase were the only driving force for her. It is no coincidence that other characters including Half-Face did not comprehend her motive for coming to the US, saying, "Getting your ass kicked halfway around the world just to burn a suit. I never heard such a fool notion" and "You made me carry this shit up here? You carried all this shit halfway around the world? You crazy or what?" (Mukherjee 1989). Usually, these artifacts only make absolute sense to those who have experienced a life-changing moment with them. Immigrants become so connected to these items that they do unimaginable things that they would not have considered doing if they had not developed such a deep affection for them.

Artifacts as Means of Identity Reinvention

Furthermore, the act of relinquishing the Cuckoo clock and the burning of Prakash's suitcase reinforce an attempt to leave behind the cultural fragments that tie Christina and Jasmine to their past selves, which no longer fully exist, and to reinvent and assume new identities. Christina and Jasmine had to break away from the memories of their past by shedding the artifacts they value. An immigrant's identity transforms not only by "construction, but also through the destruction of her existing self" (Ravichandran and Deivasigamani 2013). Therefore, Christina's family and Jasmine had to go through an emotional scuffle by destroying or giving away the artifacts that hold substantial personal and cultural significance to them in order to survive. The symbolic act of detaching from material possessions leads to identity reinvention.

Unfortunately for Christina, the immigrant journey does not allow her to make unhindered, subjective choices, as she must relinquish her most cherished artifact to survive and reinvent her identity. Christina eventually breaks the promise she made, as she unwillingly exchanges her most cherished clock with the Indians for her newfound love, Louisa Emilie, as she had to give "a last, longing look at her little clock" (Gurasich 1989) during the exchange. Through this act, Christina regrettably cuts a part of her old self, especially her memory of her grandma's parting gift, and embraces a new cultural orientation. By giving away her clock, she finally accepts that she cannot permanently keep it when it comes to matters of life and death, as she constantly had to "Point to the clock... point to the baby... [and] do not show how frightened you are" (Gurasich 1989) to persuade the Indians. Her exchange of the clock indicates a determination to survive in a foreign land. Also, it shows that the memory of her "little Oma" is "becoming dim," and she does not have anything "to remind her every hour of the grandmother who loved her more than anyone on earth" (Gurasich 1989). Thus, in this context, the Cuckoo clock represents a commodity of exchange, escape, and rebirth. The value, as well as the rarity, of the Cuckoo clock saves Christina's sibling from abduction. Her realization that she cannot hold onto the clock forever shows her gradual detachment from her cultural roots, a consequence of her presence in a new culture. For an immigrant, the struggle to survive often requires a readiness to let go of cherished artifacts and to disconnect emotionally from them in order to reinvent one's identity. Historically, as recorded in the novel's blurb, *Letters to Oma*, Gurasich (1989) came across a picture of "an antique German cuckoo clock." As a result of her profound fascination with the "story of the German settlers, their hardships and sacrifices, and their immense contributions to the patchwork-quilt culture that is Texas" (Gurasich 1989), the novel heavily centers on the clock. Christina's realization that "I know, too, that I do not need the clock as I once did, Oma. Even without it, I will remember and love you always" (Gurasich 1989) resonates with the stories of immigrants who have to adjust to a new culture as they need to let go off memories of precious artifacts to move forward successfully.

Furthermore, Jasmine's burning of the suitcase signifies a major phase of identity reinvention. Prakash's suitcase captures the theme of homeland memories and represents the transformation of identity. After Half-Face sexually molests Jasmine, the clean,

unsullied suitcase of “some new man-made material” (Mukherjee 1989), which contained Prakash’s aspirations, deteriorates sharply to become a suitcase of “dishonored old clothes” (Mukherjee 1989). Following the traumatic encounter, Jasmine admits that “I could not let my personal dishonor disrupt my mission. There would be plenty of time to die; I had not yet burned my husband’s suit” (Mukherjee 1989). Her transformation in identity was not solely a result of the sexual act (Ruppel 1995) but, more importantly, a reflection of her mission to destroy the fragments of her husband’s aspirations. Jasmine turns into “a sati-goddess” (Mukherjee 1989) because Half-Face “touched” Prakash’s suit, “put on the suit, touched my sari, my photographs and Ganpati” (Mukherjee 1989). Due to Jasmine’s emotional attachment to the artifacts, Half-Face’s desecration of them compels her to slay him. Jasmine reinvents her identity by putting on her “last clean salwar-kameez” (Mukherjee 1989), which implies that she has figuratively changed from a sexually assaulted Indian to a new identity. Thus, when Jasmine makes the statement that, “But Jyoti... burned herself in a trash-can.... Jasmine lived for the future... Jase...lived for today” (Mukherjee 1989), she meant that her identity is malleable, as it changes depending on the circumstances she encounters. Her changes in identity reflect Heersmink’s (2021) argument that “our overall cultural identity” is “the totality of our different cultural identities.” Her intentional act of burning her Indian clothes together with Prakash’s suitcase rather than committing “self-immolation” demonstrates her willingness to incinerate “the shell of her previous life in order to obtain a new one” (Čukić 2016). Moreover, Jasmine receives a new suitcase from Lilian when she decides to move to New York. Jasmine states that “She [Lilian] packed me a suitcase full of her daughter’s old clothes” (Mukherjee 1989). The suitcase filled with clothes belonging to an American child represents a focal shift in Jasmine’s integration into American culture. The fact that she receives a new suitcase with American clothes indicates that she is gradually adapting and growing into the American culture. Lilian’s advice to Jasmine to adopt the mannerisms and speech of Americans, as “they’ll think you were born here” (Mukherjee 1989), indicates Jasmine’s eventual success in assimilating into the foreign culture.

Material Culture as Identity Preservers and Cultural Resisters

While cultural unresponsiveness is often an obstacle to assimilation, certain artifacts suggest that this paralysis can also function as a form of resistance that allows the characters to maintain agency in preserving traditions, even as they navigate hybrid identities and the pressures of cultural erasure. Christina’s Mama represents the reluctance to change and adapt to the demands of the new culture. She is the real definition of an unwillingness to move beyond the comforts of one’s cultural inclinations and prejudices. In the novel, Christina’s Mama “was not reconciled to the loss of her beloved china, and now, all her best dresses and bonnets were in one of the abandoned chests” (Gurasich 1989). Christina’s Mama’s insistence on persistently longing for her former way of life and her lamentation over lost possessions reflect a deep attachment to her German cultural identity and an inherent resistance to change. Her Mama’s utterance highlights a tension between cultural preservation and adaptation in the face of change. Her reluctance to abandon the artifacts of her

previous life demonstrates the challenge of readjusting to new, unfamiliar contexts. Though Christina's Mama had a hard time adjusting to fit in, her firmness on preserving her German culture had a positive impact on her family, as their dual identities as Germans and Americans set them apart from others and expedited their survival in a foreign land. For instance, the "beautiful...cookstove" that arrives from Germany reminds the von Scholls of Mama's memories and connects them to their heritage of cooking the "Lebkuchen" (Gurasich 1989) delicacy during Christmas throughout their stay in America. By preparing traditional delicacies, "they recall home and family" (van der Spuy 2018). Their consumption of wide-ranging culinary artifacts reflects their hybrid identities as simultaneously Germans and Americans.

Objects within the immigrants' lives function as both constraints and catalysts for transformation. While some artifacts like Christina's Mama's china reinforce psychological immobility, others, such as letters, capture the immigrants' personal and cultural reinvention. The immigrant novels portray letters as artifacts that capture the hopes, hardships, and successes of the Scholls by connecting them to their cultural memories and helping them navigate their adversities with confidence. The immigrant narratives emphasize the importance of traditional communication channels as they reflect the immigrants' challenges, including their feelings of isolation and estrangement. Christina reveals that, "You must be ever so worried, my dearest Grandmother, since we left you nearly four months ago in Germany and you have heard no news of us" (Gurasich 1989). Her letters provide a realistic, chronological perspective on her family's challenging experiences, emotional trauma, and solitude. Through her vivid descriptions and reflections, Christina conveys the struggles that characterize the immigrant experience. Her promise to "keep it always, this letter" (Gurasich 1989) reveals her emotional dependence on the correspondence with her Oma. The arrival of a letter from her Oma leads to an emotional moment for Christina's mother, as it triggers a craving for the material comforts of home, as "Mama's thoughts turned ... to ...the things she wanted most: nice furniture and rugs, china and bedding. Her eyes shone as she saw the money fall from the envelope" (Gurasich 1989). In that moment, Christina's Mama's thoughts drift to the tangible things that would enhance their survival in a foreign land. Christina's correspondence with her Oma captures moments of longing, distress, and survival, as she is filled with "tears" when she reads her Oma's "small, spidery handwriting" (Gurasich 1989). The letters also show the emotional distress that accompanies such a significant life transition. Christina's letters to her Oma present a personalized narrative of the difficulties they encounter in a foreign country. Gurasich (1989) emphasizes in the blurb of her novel that "More often these letters—and the text woven in between them—are bright with adventure, for Tina finds Texas an exciting, if puzzling, place." In the novel, Christina celebrates overcoming challenges through the letters to her Oma. The vivid descriptions in the letters capture her identity transformation.

Artifacts as Immigration Agents

Additionally, letters amplified the characters' aspirations and eventually inspired them to leave their homeland. In *Letters to Oma*, Max von Scholl's papers kickstarted his family's immigration from Germany. The protest papers represent a deliberate resistance against Max's country's manner of governance. Though Max wished to ignite a sense of civic responsibility and encourage active participation in the fight for a more just and democratic society, he concurrently attracted backlash when he published "papers condemning the government and urging the people to demand a democracy for Germany" (Gurasich 1989). The protest papers set the stage for the Scholls' immigration since Max's criticism of the government through the papers forcefully pushed them out of their birth culture. Max opposed the status quo and broke his allegiance to the German government the moment he decided to protest it. Therefore, he had the option to stay and fight, which was not likely, or leave for Texas, which "means freedom for you and your family, Max, freedom!" (Gurasich 1989). As he criticizes the government's failures and calls for reform, he creates an environment that makes it increasingly implausible for his family to remain in their homeland. Also, Max's family's immigration was contingent on the letter he received from Herr Friedrich Ernst about the possibilities abroad, such as the land and house-building arrangements available to German immigrants. Christina points out in one of her letters that they moved to Texas as a result of Ernst's "letter...[that] Papa read and then decided we would come to Texas" (Gurasich 1989). The sugarcoated letter awakens the immigrants' curiosity and entices them to travel. At that point, they envision a future that diverges from their birth culture; thus, they find themselves in a moment of identity renegotiation.

Similarly, letters and travel documents create a charming mirage that inspired Jasmine's immigration to a foreign land. During Jasmine's childhood, Masterji, her teacher, used to read letters from his "nephew in California" (Mukherjee 1989) about the climate and work conditions in the US. These letters and stories subconsciously ingrained a desire to travel abroad in Jasmine. The letter from Professor Devinder Vadhera completely changed the narrative of Prakash and Jasmine's lives forever. The letter gives purpose and intent to the couple who eagerly wanted to "be on the other side of earth, out of God's sight" (Mukherjee 1989). Jasmine admits that she did not "think, growing up in Hasnapur, we ever sent or received a letter" (Mukherjee 1989). Therefore, Professorji's reassurance in his "sleek blue American aerograms" that he wants to see Prakash "leave the petty, luckless world of Jullundhar" (Mukherjee 1989), so that his "truly best student [will be] blooming in the healthy soil of this country [US]" (Mukherjee 1989), depicts the orthodox facade of a land flowing with milk and honey against the reality of alienation and constant struggles that travelers to foreign lands constantly face. The letter not only conveys a deceptive scheme about the immigrant experiences abroad but also creates a sense of urgency that drives the immigrants to visualize their success in a foreign land without considering the accompanying complications. By imagining a life beyond their birth culture, Jasmine's national identity and fidelity as a patriotic Indian come into question as she contemplates the possibility of seeking refuge in an alternative

culture. The strong attraction that ultimately compelled Jasmine to leave the familiarity of her homeland creates an avenue for the mediation of identity.

Furthermore, the “forged, expensive passport” and “forged documents” (Mukherjee 1989) represent Jasmine’s sole passage to accomplish her husband’s aspirations. These documents are not just mere travel assets; they showcase Jasmine’s ability to navigate a world that has become increasingly hostile. The identity of Jasmine as an accepted immigrant depended so much on her securing a “green card” or, in more desperate circumstances, “even a forged one,” as she hardly felt “safe going outdoors,” admitting that “a green card was freedom” (Mukherjee 1989). For Jasmine to survive in a foreign land, she had to reinvent her identity to fit in the American culture. Obtaining a green card represented not just legal status but a pathway to freedom and the chance to build a new life in a foreign land. In contrast to Grewal’s (2005) concession that Jasmine migrated “without documents,” even the excitement of using counterfeit “visa stamps” made Jasmine “feel renewed, the recipient of an organ transplant” (Mukherjee 1989). To assimilate into American culture, she felt compelled to reinvent herself in ways that allowed her to blend in by relying on the disguise of forged documents. By using fake documentation, Jasmine presents herself as “nineteen” (Mukherjee 1989), which gives her a camouflage of youth and innocence. Her statement that she “bloomed from a diffident alien with forged documents into adventurous Jase” (Mukherjee 1989) captures the depth of her identity reinvention, as she was not merely adapting; she was being reborn.

Artifacts as Indicators of Hybrid Identities

Ships operate as hybrid, liminal spaces where Jasmine and the Scholls experience the weight of impending hardships and uncertain futures that collide with the echoes of cherished memories left ashore. More than mere vessels, *Neptune* (Gurasich 1989) and “a shrimper out of Grand Cayman called *The Gulf Shuttle*” (Mukherjee 1989) symbolize the tension between departure from a culture that holds so many nostalgic memories and arrival in a new culture with uncertain circumstances. *Neptune* and *the Gulf Shuttle* represent a disconnection of the passengers’ ties to their past and an ushering into uncharted realities. The names of the ships resonate with the immigrants’ contemporaneous emotions of hope and misery. Neptune, “the eighth and most distant planet from the sun” (Wood 2022), and the Gulf, a vast expanse of sea with a narrow opening, represent a journey from familiar territories to a distant land of uncertainties, restrictions, anxieties, and alienation, which reflects Hron’s (2018) argument on the alienating effects of immigration. The passengers leave behind their former identities and embrace new beginnings. Christina says that “*Neptune* was our unhappy home for fifty-eight days. I began to think we would never set foot on land again. The cold, wet winds chilled our bones and rocked the ship to and fro like a paper boat on a windy pond” (Gurasich 1989). Christina’s account captures the harrowing conditions faced by immigrants during their journey across the sea. While the ships promised passage to a land overflowing with opportunities, the reality aboard was far from ideal. Christina’s family, together with other immigrants, endured relentless hardships. They stayed in “overcrowded” bunks, had inadequate and “miserable” (Gurasich 1989) food supplies, and faced the constant threat of illness and death. The experience was

not merely a physical expedition, but also an emotional trial that tested their resilience, as they had no choice but to survive in such deplorable circumstances that required situational adaptation.

Notwithstanding the immigrants' multifaceted cultural or racial orientations and individual preferences, their presence on the ships makes them an indistinguishable, homogeneous group of homo sapiens. Being on the ships, the immigrants' cultural identities cannot be ascertained, as they were even terrified that they may "end up [as] bait-fish" or "[be] domped in dat goddom ocean!" (Mukherjee 1989), as "bodies were given to the sea" (Gurasich 1989). This description highlights the anonymous, non-human-like identities of the immigrants on the ships. At this point, they are suspended in the fragile balance between longing for their old way of life and adapting to their new environment. As these ships glide through the ocean, Jasmine and the Scholls reflect on the bittersweet farewells of the familiar, while boldly moving toward the unknown. For instance, the ship *Jasmine* embarks on represents the promise of an arduous journey of self-discovery. Jasmine mentions how they slept in "tiered bunks" and "under the tarp" (Mukherjee 1989). She emphasizes that "In the New World, ... You learn to roll with the waves and hold the vomit in" (Mukherjee 1989). The immigrants' difficult experiences on the *Neptune* and *The Gulf Shuttle* foreshadow the impending danger, emotional turmoil, and alienation that await them in their destinations. Each challenge they encounter builds a sense of unease that reflects the isolation and unrest that lie ahead. Bhabha's (1994) idea of the third space suggests that identity is not fixed but is negotiated within spaces of ambiguity. The ships in *Letters to Oma* and *Jasmine* embody this uncertainty, as they serve as sites where the immigrants hover between past and future and struggle with the psychological stasis of migration.

Artifacts as Signifiers of Shifting Identities

Finally, in Christina's effort to adapt to her new life in Texas, the bluebonnets metaphorically mirror the determination and hope that define her identity. Christina develops a deep emotional connection with the bluebonnets, a flower that symbolizes perseverance and beauty in her new life in Texas. "They were called bluebonnets, and Tina knew she would never see another flower she would love as much. To her, they symbolized her new life in Texas" (Gurasich 1989). The bluebonnets represent Christina's newly formed identity, as they "grew everywhere, coming up unbidden and untended, but dauntless, filling the air with their spicy fragrance. Nothing could stop them; they were a part of Texas" (Gurasich 1989). These features parallel her determination to help her family adapt to their circumstances. Christina's utterance, "no matter what she had to do to help her family survive these early hardships, they would learn to love this land and become a part of it" (Gurasich 1989), emphasizes her sense of responsibility and her courage in facing adversity. Unlike her Mama, who consistently resisted assimilating into the new culture until her untimely death, Christina hopes that her family will embrace the new culture and fully integrate into its community. Just as the bluebonnets are a permanent part of Texas, Christina wishes for her family to welcome the challenges and the beauty it offers, saying, "I want all of us to grow up as good Americans, never forgetting that we are Germans,

too” (Gurasich 1989). The bluebonnets represent a metaphor for personal growth and a reflection on Tina’s environment. It suggests that the Scholls ultimately flourish and belong in the land of Texas, regardless of the hardships they faced.

Comparatively, the jasmine flower represents the connection between past cultural heritage and integration into a new environment. The title of Mukherjee’s novel, *Jasmine*, symbolizes the adaptability of Jasmine as she negotiates multiple identities. The jasmine flower—typically called the “Queen of the night” and known for its shallow-root quality and “noticeable fragrance” (*Jasmine Plants* 2018)—conveys Jasmine’s remarkable ability to persist through the many challenges she faces. Jasmine recalls that her father “would lie on a charpoy under a flowering jasmine tree all day” (Mukherjee 1989), and she put the “sweetest-smelling jasmynes” (Mukherjee 1989) and “jasmine wreath” (Mukherjee 1989) in her hair. Considering the meaning of the flower, Jasmine embodies the essence of its fragrance as her enduring identity aroma is not bound by geography. As she acknowledges, “Jyoti, Jasmine: I shuttled between identities” (Mukherjee 1989), her figuratively shallow roots give her the autonomy to flourish in a foreign land. As Carter-Sanborn (1994) concedes, the “metamorphosis of character” is founded on “violence” and “pain wrought from without,” as she had to change her identity through violence on her first day in America. As she changes from Jyoti to Jasmine to Jane, it illustrates her hybridity as she effortlessly transforms into a different personality depending on the context. Jasmine makes a factual statement that “America may be fluid and built on flimsy, invisible lines of weak gravity, but I was a dense object, I had landed and was getting rooted” (Mukherjee 1989), which reflects the name Prakash gave to her. Hron’s (2018) argument that certain immigrants are better equipped to adapt and manage immigration “stressors” accurately reflects Jasmine’s determination to survive despite her struggles with alienation.

Conclusion

In Gurasich’s *Letters to Oma* and Mukherjee’s *Jasmine*, artifacts serve as major symbols of identity formation. Mukherjee (2011) emphasizes that “immigrants are determined to remake their identities...even if the larger society fails to recognize that goal.” Throughout the novels, artifacts have a significant impact on the immigrants’ journey of identity retention and transformation. Artifacts like the clock function as the immigrants’ emotional therapists in overcoming the psychological trauma of disconnection. As much as immigrants become passionately connected to the artifacts, their only means of survival is to let go of the artifacts and detach from them emotionally. Artifacts also help them to retain and uphold traditions while they contend with hybrid identities. Through their interactions with objects like Christina’s letters, Prakash’s suitcase, the ships, and the Cuckoo clock, Christina and Jasmine confront the challenges of assimilation while forging new identities in a foreign land. Ultimately, these artifacts capture the intricate narratives of acculturation and identity reinvention that define the immigrant experience.

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