



Politics of the Workplace: Gender and Ethnic Identities at Work – A Study of Select American Novels

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Abstract

Contemporary migration around the world is increasingly driven by job prospects. The workplace as such becomes a significant space of enquiry to understand half the equation of the immigrant condition. Yet this aspect has received scant attention within literatures of migration. This paper attempts to analyse the workplace dynamics as revealed in select contemporary American novels by studying texts by four different writers from Indian American (Bharati Mukherjee and Thrity Umrigar) and Korean American (Min Jin Lee and Suki Kim) communities. The American workplace is a site of much immigrant activity, the norms of which play a huge role in the overall immigrant condition. This paper then seeks to examine whether the sociological theories regarding workplace politics find a parallel representation in literature and if it does, what these representations might imply. It explores how the texts deal with the serious allegations of workplace profiling and whether there is any attempt at challenging/overcoming such allegations. The paper also analyses the politics of representation that leads to the upholding of certain stereotypes while rejecting/ignoring others.

Keywords

American, migration, workplace, gender, race

I

The aim of this paper is to analyse the way in which gender and ethnic identities factor in the way immigrants are treated in the workplace, as well as in the choice of one's career as revealed in literatures of migration. Gender and ethnicity are two of the more obvious attributes that are easily recognized about a person and therefore, the two aspects based on which people are stereotyped more often than not. This is more of a case in the context of a multicultural space like the United States where the plurality of the population leads to strong stereotypical assumptions based on their linguistic, gender, ethnic and socio-economic background. The ethnic marker in a person is often considered so overwhelming that one's identity is by default assumed to possess similar attributes as the ethnicity one belongs to. Immigrants in America are frequently typecasted on the basis of their ethnicity. This, despite the fact that the Civil Rights Act of 1964 prohibits employers from discriminating against and segregating employees on the basis of sex, race, or ethnicity. Assumptions about ethnicity play a central role in the kind of jobs open to immigrants from different races. Certain "characteristic" ethnic features are assumed to be present within each member of the community and as such the work assigned to them reflect on these characteristics.

Profiling is the predetermined treatment meted out to individuals based on the stereotypical expectations of their being affiliated to a certain group. Profiling is important because it plays an insidious yet immense role in the immigrant condition. Profiling is what leads to the regeneration of stereotyped notions which in turn leads to the validity of profiling, thus becoming a self-perpetuating cycle. This often emerges out of histories of lived experiences of the community as a whole in the course of their presence in the country. Job profiling implies that different immigrants are considered worthy/capable of different jobs based on their gender/ethnicity. Depending on one's country of origin, one's qualification – both social and job-oriented – is decided. One's credentials are not simply "right" till the person is the "right" person. Studies led by Maher on labour market led her to conclude that, "The hiring process further reinforces such stereotypes by treating job applicants as powerless, identical commodities rather than as workers with choices, rights, and individualized skills". She further goes on to observe that while the employees themselves "did not appear to adopt or internalize these constructions in their own self-perceptions, they had little choice but to acknowledge and negotiate with them, both in interviewing for jobs and in their later relationships with employers" (189).

When it comes to gender, a similar pattern can be traced. The female immigrant is twice exposed to the perils of stereotype when it comes to the workplace. The fact that these women come from cultures that is much more patriarchal in nature than the mainstream American society, drapes these women with a veil of submissiveness, expecting from them docility, and gradually branding them with an identity they would have happily left behind at the home country.

At times, profiling also works as token representation. The very fact of profiling can be exploited to earn social currency by some. One particular person may be showcased, rather her ethnic identity highlighted, so as to give an image of adequate representation. This creates an illusion of inclusiveness and social equality, which is often lacking in the everyday work life scenario.

II

Through the novels taken up, this paper deliberates upon the nature of work open to immigrants of different ethnicities as also on the role that gender plays on the assignment of work. Racial and gender profile determine the kind of jobs that are open for contemporary immigrants in America. But race and gender is again subject to social profiling. The American workplace is a widely diverse arena where people are frequently segregated based on their race, gender and social profiles. Many factors act as obstacles to immigrants on their way to pursue a career. Conventions, values and egos have to be renegotiated before one can think of having a career. Yet if after overcoming all such factors, an individual finally sets out to look for a job, they are faced with a whole new set of challenges. The workplace is a very select space that is not welcoming of everyone. The chosen texts for study reveal the workplace dynamics of two different communities – Indian American and Korean American. These two Asian communities occupy a similar kind of standing in terms of education and aspirations. But there is a huge gap in the kind of socio-economic background they come from. The Korean Americans recognized as model citizens in contemporary US come from less than harmonious households/backgrounds. Although the traditional importance given to education has taken the younger Korean Americans to scale new heights, their beginnings can mostly be traced to a strictly disciplined family life, the ideals of which can hardly be said to compare to the mainstream American values. On the other hand, the Indian Americans, at least the ones that find a voice in literature, come from privileged background

– materially as well as culturally. They are also considered more open to intercultural exchange; this openness in turn opening various avenues for them.

In the case of the Indian American texts, *If Today Be Sweet* (Thrity Umrigar) and *Desirable Daughters* (Bharati Mukherjee), it is seen that the characters come from well-educated background. Even in the homeland, they had roots that go back a long way. These characters' decision to come to the US is a conscious decision, based on their (or their guardians') planning and aspirations for their future. They are not in the US by accident. It is by effort and at a price acceptable to them. As opposed to this, the Korean Americans whom we meet in the two texts, *The Interpreter* (Suki Kim) and *Free Food for Millionaires* (Min Jin Lee), at least the first generation found themselves in the US because of external factors beyond their control. Coming away to a new land for them was either a result of persecution at home or a means to a better, more secured life. Success thus becomes much more significant and less assured to these people as a family. An education has to be justified with its end result.

Kind of Jobs Open to Immigrants

Even before they decide about their workplace, immigrants are pigeonholed into certain roles. Certain communities are considered as preferring to work certain jobs. These assumptions are often based on nothing more than the historical association of certain communities with certain fields and at times, not even that. The opportunities open to an individual become strictly restricted based on their perception as a member of a particular community. Preferences for skilled jobs are given to communities that are traditionally seen as more advanced than others. Women are preferred more for “softer” jobs in the skilled section or conversely, for unspecialized menial work in low paying jobs. With the third world problems of unemployment and scarcity of resources finding its way into the United States, immigrants have increasingly come to be considered a threat by the mainstream. As result, stringent measures are being taken to lower the number of people immigrating to the US for job hunting.

The four texts under study uphold these ground realities. The texts reveal the limitations that immigrants face as they go about their career. The glass ceiling is set at different heights for different people based on their race, gender as well as social background. In *If Today Be Sweet* and *Desirable Daughters*, we meet characters of Indian origin who are more or less established in specialized white collar jobs. Their educational and socio-economic background marks them for success. As far as entering their preferred

field goes, they end up exactly where they wish to go. Indians, as well as other Asians, are portrayed as practical go-getters who are very sure about where they want to be as well as how to be there.

Bish became an electrical engineering student in India because his father told him he would be an engineer, and he excelled at it because that is what Chatterjees did. He received a scholarship to Stanford because that was the best place to go and everything Bish Chatterjee did was best. ... The Asian students plowed ahead. (Mukherjee 44)

Yet despite their easy causality between determination and success, there is an awareness among these people that their easy life is made possible at the behest of mainstream America; that the success they enjoy is limited to the very few, for the ones much above the average immigrant. Also there is the suggestion that the only real way to break the glass ceiling is to be an entrepreneur, so as to be the master at your own game. And Bish does that by partnering with Chet Lee (another Asian) and discovering a concept that revolutionised the entire world.

He (Bish Chatterjee) is the posterboy of Indian entrepreneurship, the reason why political parties sometimes reach consensus on loosening immigration laws, increasing the number of H-1B visas. (“We don’t want to turn away the Bish Chatterjees of this world,” they say). (Mukherjee 26)

Fear coexists with this self-assurance because they are always aware of how easily the walls may be breached. Because just outside the gated communities of Silicon Valley dwells the “small army of America’s untouchables, a mockery of everything immigrant behavior stands for” (Mukherjee 79). And one can never quite forget that the Bish Chatterjees might be made to pay for the criminal doings of these poor immigrants. Underneath their blatant obvious success lies the fear that their professional success is never a surety for continued progress.

In *The Interpreter* and *Free Food for Millionaires*, by contrast, the characters exhibit a certain hesitation while choosing their preferred sector. These characters are trying to venture into areas that are significantly different from their parents’. There are three key theories regarding Korean Americans engaging in small businesses: the disadvantage theory, the ethnic resources theory and the opportunity structure theory (Hurh, 58). All these theories come to factor in the narrative of Korean American texts especially as first generation Korean Americans are often seen engaged in small businesses. Language difficulties and cultural unfamiliarity often led to disadvantages while pursuing a satisfactory job. For a Casey Han brought up in the US (*Free Food for Millionaires*), despite her Princeton

education and enviable golf handicap, it is impossible to forget or get over the fact that she was jeered at school because her parents managed a drycleaners. She considers herself at a disadvantage compared to her peers. Her dress and her inappropriate joke at the campus job interview reveals her complete lack of comprehending the situation and its requirements. Yet Casey is a determined person; she does not join the Columbia Law School because life as an attorney does not appeal to her. She is very sure that she wants to be a banker and is willing to put in all the hard work as well as face all the misogyny on her way to becoming one. It is a different story that the banking world is very dismissive of a woman as a banker and it is quite interesting to see how a room full of intelligent, brilliant men can only see women as working in secretarial positions. Casey's sister, Tina, is a premed at MIT at the beginning of the novel. But marriage happens and then before she knows it, she is a mother. It seems unlikely that Tina will make much of her career. Casey's sole Korean American friend, Ella Shim, is stuck in the stereotypical immigrant job for woman. She works as an assistant to the principal at a school. Most of the characters in this book come from families that work all seven days without rest just to give their children the best education possible. It is interesting to note that Ella and Unu Shim, the two cousins who come from wealth and comfort, are the only two characters in the novel for whom success in the workplace matters the least.

In *The Interpreter*, we see how difficult it is for the young people to break out of their environment to pursue a different life. People get trapped in the closed connections of community and end up pursuing the same lives as their parents. Even when one has moved on and chosen a career that has nothing to do with one's background, ties of community ensure that one cannot make a complete break with one's past.

Despite such gloomy instances, what these books seem to point out for sure is that there is no death for entrepreneurs. If one is an enterprising person, willing to take that leap of faith, they are rewarded by success. Gender too stops being an obstacle in the face of such determination. The character of Sabine Jun Gottesman, the supremely successful first generation owner of a departmental store is a testimony to that, beating all obstacles of race, gender and language to achieve success in the US (*Free Food for Millionaires*).

Workplace Dynamics

... I handle the "multicultural" acquisitions as a school volunteer... I can't teach, lacking a certificate, but I donate time and money. The little kids are ninety percent Asian, Latino, and African-American, the teachers, at least

during the two years that I have volunteered here, all European-Americans.
(Mukherjee 78)

After all the effort that one has to go through just to make an entry into the job market, there come the struggles of the workplace. These struggles may take the form of discrimination, issues of respect, erasure of one's ethnic identity in order to assimilate, genuine misguided identification with the alpha white male, and in the most common case, hitting the glass ceiling.

The workplace has its own sense of hierarchy firmly in place. The stereotypes that emerge through the various sociological studies into the American workplace find reflection in literature as well; its strict enforcement obvious by the presence of characters like George Ortiz, the good-natured stereotypical Puerto Rican doorman (Lee 276); Juanita, the Hispanic middle-aged cleaner (Umrigar 36), et al. But it is not simply the presence of these stock characters; rather it is their position in the hierarchy that sheds light into this vile practice. The Indian man is definitely below the white woman but he still is higher than the Hispanic woman who clings to the lowest rung in the ladder.

And thinking of women made him think of the dark, thin face of Juanita, the middle-aged Hispanic woman who cleaned the office every evening. He could not leave this mess on the floor for Juanita to clean up. (Umrigar 36)

The American workplace sees a lot of discrimination in the treatment meted out to individuals based on their gender and ethnicity. Even competent white women like Delia who have everything going for them ends up being exploited for their sexuality, ensured to never rise beyond a secretarial position. It is ironic that the only woman who survived in a floor full of alpha males survives not by flaunting her intelligence but by employing that intelligence to highlight her physical assets through suggestive clothing. Where a Casey loses out expressly because she is a woman in a man's world, Delia and Tara loses out because of a technicality – Delia despite her competence for not having a college degree and Tara despite her high qualifications for not having a certificate to teach. Ambivalent sexism is always at work to keep women away from active competition in the workplace. Susan Fiske talks about this when she explores the stigma related to professional women where it is generally considered that “traditional women are stereotypically warm but incompetent, whereas professional women are allegedly competent but cold” (Fiske 688).

Even within the unregulated labour market, within the very same community, instances are seen that makes discrimination a norm to be accepted without question. These

places, that provide no insurance or paid vacations, instead rely on a system of “humaneness” (sic) and culture to dictate its operating terms.

Joseph earned a thousand dollars a week..., and Leah made five hundred..., though she worked as both cashier and seamstress. Mr. Kang would never pay the wife the same as the husband, though he always paid widows more than wives for the same work. (Lee 299)

In instances like these, it is not possible to simply label it gender discrimination. Here the issues at work are a strange mix of patriarchy, convention and practical consideration.

Interestingly, the same rhetoric of patriarchy is exploited in *If Today be Sweet* when it is used against a deserving coloured man by a white woman. When Grace Butler needs to put Sorab in his place, she conveniently disregards his ethnic identity and all that it entails, to just focus on his privileges of being a male, thereby nullifying all his struggles and challenges in his way to being a top management executive.

Old boys club? Does she even see me or the color of my skin? Sorab thought. Is she lumping me with all those middle-aged white men who have worked here forever? Does she think I wear green plaid pants and go golfing every weekend? (Umrigar 111)

The workplace dynamics thus evolve to fit the discourse of the people in control. At times, one might be undone by one’s gender while at other times, it might be race. But what is soon clear upon a closed reading is that these are factors which will always hold one back. When Sorab was passed over for promotion, it was because the management felt that “even” a white woman would be a better boss than a coloured man. But then when it comes to affirmative action, in the words of Ted Kim, “Maybe being female might help. Being Asian: no” (Lee 187).

Politics of Representation

The workplace is seldom seen from the perspective of the employer but it is nonetheless true that a firm’s reputation is built on its employees. Thus, it is often seen that a firm would make an attempt to retain a particular individual to showcase its own magnanimity. This might lead to actions that actually end up alienating an event from its context, appropriating it for its own petty need. For instance, in *If Today Be Sweet*, Tehmina’s action of rescuing her neighbour’s kids results in her being celebrated as a “Christmas miracle”. She is named the “Christmas angel” in the media, despite her being a Parsi and her actions having to do with a generous, and if it can thus be categorized, Indian

spirit and nothing to do with Christmas. Her fame leads to doors being opened to her son's declining career as well as to her acceptance not only among the whites of the community but more for her joy, among her son and daughter-in-law, for whom suddenly she is no longer a constant source of irritation.

There is another politics of representation that concerns a reader of these texts, i.e. the writers' conscious decision to reveal what they do. Despite the fact that all the texts portray different class of people, yet mostly the texts seem to conform to the widely held beliefs about immigrants. The Korean American work life as revealed in *The Interpreter* reveals the great web of family-run Korean small businesses. Whole ghettos rise up centering such businesses. *Free Food for Millionaires* though is successful in portraying characters from diverse wakes of life, exploiting the common real life experience of the widely popular Korean laundries and nail-salons as well as the image of the hugely successful model citizen of the contemporary times. In case of the Indian texts, there is an attempt to ignore the presence of the significant number of Indians engaged as taxi-drivers, etc., basically people from the lower-middle class background. The Sardar taxi driver in *Desirable Daughters* is one rare image. Yet the presence of the economically poor Indian is very much felt as a threat throughout the course of the novel. In the case of a vast country like India that has on offer a plurality of culture and with it, enormous diversity of background, the writers' own experiences and perspectives determine the kind of incidents that are described in the texts. The fact that most writers of Indian origin writing in the US today comes from a background of privilege ensures that the experiences recorded in their texts is limited to the troubles of their own class. It is to be hoped therefore that the comparatively poorer and more numerous Indian American population soon find a voice to speak for herself.

III

Despite claims by various sociological studies that segregation on the basis of race, gender and ethnicity has decreased in the workplace with the coming into force of the Civil Rights Act (Tomaskovic-Devey 565), the literatures of representation tells a different story. It is to be expected that with the recent upheavals in the fabric of American politics, newer studies will need to look at these erstwhile assessments critically. The increasing paranoia regarding the job market scenario has brought about substantial changes in immigration policy. This in a way corroborates the insecurity regarding work situations that has always shimmered in immigrant literature. Immigrants are more often than not generalized based on

their gender/ethnic backgrounds and it is only so far that an individual can go within a certain system before she hits the glass ceiling. The only places where immigrants have truly showcased their full potential are places without glass ceilings, i.e. when they are entrepreneurs and working without supervision, and thus without any need to mould oneself to the stereotyped expectations. This one can claim is equally true of life as in fiction.

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