



*International Journal of Humanities & Social Science Studies (IJHSSS)*  
*A Peer-Reviewed Bi-monthly Bi-lingual Research Journal*  
ISSN: 2349-6959 (Online), ISSN: 2349-6711 (Print)  
Volume-II, Issue-IV, January 2016, Page No. 63-67  
Published by Scholar Publications, Karimganj, Assam, India, 788711  
Website: <http://www.ijhsss.com>

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## **Involuntary Displacement across Geographical Borders in Select South Asian Immigrant Narratives**

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### **Abstract**

*Geography has a remarkable influence on the social well being of humans as the identity of any culture has much to do with the environment in which its people live. Nature imbibes in certain cultural codes and mannerisms that later blend in to form a specific geographical identity that further contributes to the formation of cultural boundaries by distinguishing one group from the other. It is difficult to move out of one's cultural environment and settle in another, as there are many factors that have to be considered while adapting to a change. The earliest crossing of cultural boundaries were either for better pastures or for expanding one's own territories. With time, migration has new implications. The push and pull factors that makes an individual cross the boundaries require equal attention. The phenomenon of migration has gained greater significance with its adaptation into literature across cultures. This paper focuses on involuntary displacement of refugees with reference to Ice-Candy Man by Bapsi Sidhwa and select South Asian immigrant narratives.*

**Key Words:** *Forced Migration, Refugee, Geographical Displacement, Involuntary Displacement, Immigrant Narrative.*

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**Introduction:** Migration is a social process in which an individual or a group of individuals leave their parent nation to resettle temporarily or permanently in another country. According to Pryor (1975), human migration is an important part of the "general evolutionary process". Culture is a product of social interaction of people and the process of migration acts as an important factor in the process of enculturation by bringing together people of diverse backgrounds. Thus, migration being an important aspect of culture makes culture a "strategy of survival" which is transnational by nature (Tiwari 2013).

There are different factors that makes an individual to migrate, on the other hand there are yet another set of factors that makes them rethink on whether they really need to migrate or not. According to renowned Sociologist Ravenstein, 'push' and 'pull' factors drive migration (Samers 2010, Hare 1999). Lack of jobs and quality education, lack of food, high cost of living, environmental problems, religious prosecutions, civil wars in the parent nation and so on, can act as push factors; whereas the opportunity for higher education and quality research, good climate, fertile land, better employment opportunities, political and religious freedom, presence of friends and relatives, lesser crimes, marriage, lower risk of natural hazards, and political stability in the host

nation can work as the pull factor for the migrants (Jain 1993). Push and pull factors thus determine the geographical displacement.

Geographical displacement is a process of relocation across physical boundary that gives the migrants 'transnational' identity. It can be either voluntary or involuntary. When a person decides to migrate with his own will for better prospects to another country it is called voluntary displacement/migration; whereas when one migrates to another country due to unavoidable socio-political or climatic conditions in one's own country, it accounts to involuntary displacement, which is also called "forced displacement" or "forced migration" (Gagnon and Marcelo 2011).

In Involuntary displacement, migration is often caused due to the push factors. In the words of Hansen and Oliver-Smith (1982), "Forced migration is distinguished from voluntary migration by the diminished power of decision in the former, sometimes reaching an extreme in which the forced migrants are totally powerless."

**Migration and Literature:** The world of fiction gives one the treasure of imaginary travel which helps one discover realities in a greater horizon (Holmes 2010). Involuntary displacement, a significant reality of present social paradigm of immigrant tragedy has influenced the world of fiction as well. "Creativity lies in states of fluidity, conflict, and instability" (Sharma 2006). Writing is often an extended self of writers; it is the product of their experiences as socio-cultural beings in spatiotemporal parameters. Hence in the writings of migrant writers, we see the reflections of their personal experiences as migrants that include the dichotomies, states of fluidity, conflicts, and instabilities. The gamuts of writing produced by these writers which deal with the life of immigrants are called 'immigrant narratives'. This paper aims to study the process of involuntary displacement of refugees across geographical borders in *Ice-Candy Man* by Bapsi Sidhwa and select South Asian immigrant narratives.

**Involuntary Displacement in Immigrant Narratives:** Both voluntary as well as involuntary migrations cause exile— both social and psychological. Migrants who face exile due to involuntary migration are called 'Refugees'. After being forced to evacuate their homeland due to socio-political or environmental causes, the emotional bankruptcy that the refugees go through is a story of its own— "... every refugee knows how to tell his story. For him, you understand, his story is a treasured possession. For true, it is the most important thing he owns" (Ali, *In the Kitchen*, 380).

The experience of migration brings so much suffering to the refugees that they no more remain the people they used to be. Illness, deterioration in health, absence of care, shelter, and food make their living conditions worse. The aids they receive from the government of the host country never suffice their basic needs. In the words of Michael Dummett (2001), a professor of the University of Oxford and one of the most prominent commentator on the ethical and political dilemmas raised by the treatment of immigrants and refugees in Britain and Europe— "The reason for which the state exists is most usually said to be to promote the welfare of its citizens and to protect them against attack from without. These are among its purposes, indeed: but its further purpose is to represent the body of its citizens to the outside world... The Citizens of any country have individual moral obligations to any other human beings whom their actions or failures to act may affect: they therefore have, as a body, collective moral obligations to citizens of other countries."

Migrants, on the contrary, are ill treated and neglected by the host countries and often end up accepting their condition as their fate. Nazneen, a Bangladeshi migrant who lives with her family in London along with struggling refugees and peasants at Brick Lane thinks— "My husband says it is discrimination. Ask him this, then. Is it better than our own country, or is it worse? If it is worse,

then why is he here? If it is better, why does he complain?" "These were questions she had neither asked nor thought of asking. She was in this country because that was what had happened to her. Anyone else, therefore, was here for the same reason" (Ali, *Brick Lane*, 72).

"Stripped of their ancestral land" (Lahiri, *The Lowland*, 5) refugees remain a burden on the economy of the host country. From the perspective of the host country, a surge of refugees from across the border are never a welcome addition. In *The Lowland*, Lahiri describes this perspective—"On the family radio they listened to the news of East Pakistan turning into Bangladesh after thirteen days of war. For Muslim Bengalis it meant liberation, but for Calcutta the conflict had meant another surge of refugees from across the border" (Lahiri, *The Lowland*, 96).

On the contrary, these migrants never 'chose' to be a burden; in fact they never have any choice at all. Tilo, *The Mistress of Spices*, is kidnapped by the dacoits which eventually makes her land in America. In spite of the repeated attacks of the dacoits, her family never left their ancestral land and chose to die instead. In the words of Tilo—"I am telling father Abbajan we must leave now but grandfather said, "*Toba, toba*, where will we go, this is the land of our ancestors"" (Divakaruni, *The Mistress of Spices*, 27).

Migration in the time of India-Pakistan partition is candidly captured by Sidhwa in *Ice-Candy man*. The plights of involuntary displacement come alive in its pages. Villagers are forced to move across the borders leaving behind their memories and lands. At times people have relatives across borders to go to—"Unflagging, she gives a resume of the anxious letters from sisters and sisters-in-law in Bombay and Karachi, who have heard all sorts of rumours about the situation in the Punjab and are exhorting us to come to them" (Sidhwa, *Ice-Candy Man*, 79) and at times they have no one to go to.

In the moment of crisis when people witness their friends and neighbours leaving behind their homes moving away to safer places, the feeling of instability and insecurity creeps into their minds and they feel isolated and threatened in the home which once used to be their abode of happiness. Sidhwa words these situations of crisis in the episodes of her narrative—"The Mehtas have gone! The Malhotras have gone! The Guptas have gone!' says Mr Singh, coming straight out with what is uppermost in his mind... 'The Guptas too? When?' asks Mother, her voice throbbing with concern. 'About two hours back. They are joining an escorted convoy of cars.' Mother's eyes grow moist" (Sidhwa, *Ice-Candy Man*, 145).

People are forced to evacuate their lands by soldiers. In *Ice-Candy Man*, when Ranna arrives at his aunt's village, he is confused by the activity taking place around him. He sees five or six huge lorries parked in the rutted lanes and soldiers holding guns with bayonets sticking out of them, directing the villagers. "The villagers were shouting and running to and fro, carrying on their heads charpoys heaped with their belongings. Some were herding their calves and goats towards the trucks. Others were dumping their household effects in the middle of the lanes in their scramble to climb into the lorries. The army trucks were there to evacuate the villagers and take them to Pakistan" (Sidhwa, *Ice-Candy Man*, 204-205).

People helplessly get trapped in the socio-political turmoil and are left with no choice but migrate towards their fate. A villager in *Ice-Candy Man* asks a soldier—"Do you expect us to walk away with our hands and feet? What use will they serve us without our lands?" The soldier, unimpressed by the sarcasm shrugs and says—"We're just here to evacuate you: hands, feet and heads. Nothing else..." (Sidhwa, *Ice-Candy Man*, 110). It is challenging as people have to leave not just the geographical area on which they live, but everything they have valued from beginning. In the words

of the villagers– “Do you expect us to leave everything we’ve valued and loved since childhood? The seasons, the angle and colour of the sun rising and setting over our fields are so beautiful to us, the shape of our rooms and barns is familiar and dear. You can’t expect us to leave just like that!” And in reply all they get from the soldiers is– “You’re not the only village we are to evacuate” (Sidhwa, *Ice-Candy Man*, 111).

The evacuees, like cattle herds, get relocated by army trucks– “A fortnight after the Baisakhi Fair, late in the afternoon, an army truck disgorges a family of villagers outside our gate... Imam Din is standing in the open door, staring at a string of men, women and children as they troop up our drive. I recognise some of the faces from Pir Pindo; they are distant kin– not of his immediate family– cousins, nephews or great-grandnephews thrice removed. I wonder how he will accommodate them all in his quarters” (Sidhwa, *Ice-Candy Man*, 109). The ill-treatment of humanity hence is at worse in involuntary displacement.

Women are the worst sufferers of involuntary displacement. They either end up in households as maids, or get traded in the sex market. The society calls them “fallen women”. They suffer the decline of social status for no fault of theirs and most times are never taken back by their families even after their identification. Not just as refugees but also as voluntary migrants, women suffer more than the men; we see ample examples of these situations in immigrant narratives where women as house wives of husbands who are “teachers, researchers, doctors, engineers” remain “homesick and bewildered...” (Lahiri, *The Namesake*, 38).

In *Ice-Candy Man* Ayah suffers the fate of a “fallen woman” and is forced to become a sex worker, after her displacement. Lenny spends hours on the servants’ quarters’ roof looking down on the fallen women. The turnover, as they are rescued, sorted out and restored to their families, is so rapid that she can barely keep track of the new faces that appear and so soon disappear. The camp gets crowded and she wishes– “If this is where they bring kidnapped women, this is where I’ll find my Ayah... I wonder about the women’s children. Don’t they miss their mothers? I pray that their husbands and families will take them back” (Sidhwa, *Ice-Candy Man*, 221).

**Conclusion:** Refugees face a great ordeal of difficulties due to involuntary displacement. On the contrary the host countries also go through a wave of socio-cultural change that not only challenges their identity but also aids to problems in national security by the increase in racial, cultural, and religious tussles between the involuntarily displaced refugees and the citizens of the host community. “The socio-cultural impact of refugees on the receiving community can occur simply through their presence, in that they can play a role in altering the ethnic balance of the host community, and if the influx is sizeable, according to some, pose a threat to the cultural values and norms of the nation” (Dev 2002). These conflicts can lead to extreme cultural conditions such as ethnocentrism and xenophobia. Hence, it is important for both the migrants as well as the host communities to understand the difficulties at both ends and work towards a mutual co-existence.

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