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IMMIGRANTS IN WRITING

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ABSTRACT

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Through this autoethnography, I intend to explore and understand how migration impacted and continues to impact my identity along with the languages and literacies I speak, write, and practice. How does the normalized devaluing and valuing of literacies, languages, cultures, and in extension identities play out in the process of migration? The devaluation of languages and cultures is in fact the devaluation of those who identify with them; they are left to "feel undervalued" or "not good enough" in the languages they speak, cultures they identify with, and literacies they practice. To be "good enough" or valued, they have to assimilate. What does it mean to assimilate in migration? Where do we draw the line with assimilation? And most importantly, how do we teach and train ourselves to realize the literacies that we practice and claim the space/weight they carry? These are some of the thoughts and questions that form the foundation for my thesis project, "Immigrants in Writing." Through this project, I aim to explore migration, identity/self, and literacies/languages/cultures as they overlap and intersect.

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INTRODUCTION

Every time I was asked what my thesis is about, I chose to answer in plural. The answer always ended up sounding like "you know, it‟s about migration literacies, identities, languages, valuing/devaluing, and so on." Now I resort to calling it an autoethnography that examines the motives and impacts of migration on the self, which is what it is. When I reflected on the complexities of the former answer and thus the research topic in itself, I wanted to find a way to organize and categorize the answer for myself and for my thesis project. After all, literacies, identities, and languages are all aspects that make up the self. Beyond all the answers and thesis conversations with everyone around, we must recognize the topics I engage with in this research paper are nothing short of chaotic in their historic and present conditions. Migration, as a long drawn out process in itself, is chaotic and draining. Add to this the process of assimilation, repositioning, and reinvention of identities, cultures, literacies practiced, and languages, we are looking at years of sculpting a self that is standard, easy to categorize, and for lack of a better word, organized; all of which are, in this context, prettier words for "whitewashing" or "trying to blend in." While anything organized helps my sanity stay intact, I have also come to realize and accept that with a chaotic and painful history comes a chaotic and painful present. To dissect, understand, and work through this present is to move through the chaos and the trickled down pain its history has left. In order to do so, we must first acknowledge the intersection and overlap of migration with the self which can then help us gain at least an inch on unraveling these complexities.

The three aspects of self that we will explore through the lens of migration are identities, languages, and literacies practiced/performed. While these are standalone subject matters that could and deserve a whole thesis unto themselves, I was moved to look at them as themes within the concept and fact of migration. Growing up a third culture kid and watching my parents gain and lose multiple facets of their self and identity would explain why I thought of migration as an overarching topic for my thesis. Before diving into this autoethnographic journey, taking a look at all the petrol pumps I stopped at that fueled this long drive is essential.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Reading Ifeoma Kiddoe Nwankwo‟s article “The International Engagements of Working-Class Jamaican Women: Listening to Louise Bennett and Her Routes Women" was a breath of fresh air as a scholarly article that challenges, questions, and pushes the definitions and associations that we attach to words, in this case, migration. If I had to pick one thought to take away from Ifeoma Nwankwo‟s article, it would be reimagining my perception of migration to accommodate both physical and metaphorical definitions of migration. Nwankwo‟s decision to choose Caribbean society as her setting to discuss metaphorical migration and international engagement is not a light arbitrary one in that she knew how “fundamental” migration was and is to Caribbean identity. The article brings plenty of attention to the various motives for migration ranging from better opportunities, feeling at home elsewhere, to a desire for new experiences. While any of these are valid in themselves to migrate, unfortunately migration from a “third-world country” to a “first-world country” still equates to a supposed rise in one‟s socioeconomic status and desirability, unless and until they are labourers and/or performing any “low-level jobs” in Gulf countries. This sentiment towards migration is also very much present within Indian communities. Migration to the Middle East is good enough but if you were to migrate to any of the Western countries, your desirability as an individual and societal status would be at its highest.

Nwankwo addresses the disruption that migration causes by talking about writers, filmmakers, and artists in general who use art as a medium to illustrate the many broken yet complete shards of migration. Undoubtedly, one of the less picked up shards would be that of those people who do not physically migrate but are still very much engaged

with matters that are beyond their nation/state. While Nwankwo speaks into those who are supposedly „left behind" in the process of physical migration and are still intersecting with experiences that are a direct result of transnational events, we can begin to think about the literacies they teach themselves and practice to connect with families and friends who have moved beyond borders and are now changed or changing. Would we still think of them as „left behind" or „stationary"? To metaphorically migrate is complex to define and encompasses being present and perceptive in that which is beyond your nation/state. I intend on flipping Nwankwo"s point to try and understand an immigrant community who has migrated physically, and maybe not so much metaphorically; a community that switches between literacies, languages, and cultures both outside and across borders. For instance, I dress and talk differently when I am visiting my homes as compared to when I am in the U.S. Of course, this is only a minor example of how migration influences ourselves. Through my conversations with individuals within my community and cultures who have spent years moving, assimilating, and switching between varied codes, I look forward to realizing and comprehending aspects of my identity I leave behind or switch between when moving across borders.

In grouping literacies and languages under self and identity and examining these through the lens of migration, we must address the problematic attitude of assigning power and hierarchy to literacies and languages. While this attitude attaches value to literacies and languages, which when broken down are skills we can develop and practice, another crucial issue concerning these two, specifically literacies, is the singular approach to its definitions. The word "literacy" is most often defined and associated with the "ability to read and write" (Oxford Languages). This definition, coupled with the

value attached to "the ability to read and write" in what is "the colonizer‟s standard," contributes to the devaluing and marginalization of both "non-standard" literacies and the people who practice these "non-standard" literacies. This would also explain why looking at literacies as something we possess or lack is a perspective that solely benefits those who fit the standards and norms we live with.

Walter D. Mignolo‟s *The Darker Side of the Renaissance: Literacy, Territoriality, & Colonization* pushes its readers to look into how we have been thinking of literacies as something we have, because we also talk of it as something we lack or don‟t have. While doing so it also brings to light how apart from the seizing of geographical territories and subsequent economic benefits, the marginalization/near-abolition and controlling of language systems and cultures are simultaneous consequences of colonization that have trickled down into the present. While more abstract than the former, these issues still haunt us and dictate how our societies function on many levels. The literacies practiced by various communities are devalued on the basis of colonized skin tones, accents, and lands. This vicious cycle of white domination, racial injustice against and within people of colour, and the value and desirability attached to being white, white accents, and pretty much anything associated with whiteness is still prevalent in almost all societies. There are discrepancies within whiteness, but that does not take away from white privilege. The mockery or imitation of European accents cannot be compared to or used to justify the mockery or imitation of an Asian, African, or Arab accent, as the latter comes with a history of pain and trauma.

Rebecca Lorimer Leonard‟s *Writing on the Move: Migrant Women and the Value of Literacy,* while bringing to us raw and real stories of assimilation, migration, and self-

realization, also made me question and understand who I am in a „literate" sense. How do my literacies shape me? What are some of the literacies that I practice, but fail to recognize/acknowledge? What are some of the „literacies" expected of me as a woman, but not considered literacies? These are also moments of recognizing that literacies exist in the plural form; that it is not just reading and writing that make up our literacy/literate repertoire. But why are the literacies beyond reading, writing, and maybe even fine arts, devalued? We can find the answers to many such questions in first understanding how many of these essential practices are not deemed worthy/high enough to be called a literacy. To be clearer, the texts we have been reading and the conversations we have been engaging in have led me to think that I will not be able to define literacy. What literacy is to me today is and will not be what it is to me tomorrow. As I learn and read, I realize how literacies to me are all the practices that matter to me and make me, „me." One of my favourite literacies would then be how I play with my nieces and nephews back home. All of them being of different ages is a challenge when it comes to keeping them on their toes with games and movies that entertain them all. A literacy of my mom"s that I adore is how she knows what can make a spoiled curry good. I could go on and on. But I guess this is me starting to realize just what the word „literacy" encompasses to me. Among all the literacies I practice today, reading and writing are enablers in personal and professional lives. But they are not everything. It is not how I read or speak; it is in the conversations that we have with those who matter and about those things that matter in which we find meaning. Now I start to realize why thinking about literacies in their plural forms is important to me. It is so that one day my parents can think of themselves as people who practice many literacies, and not as people who lack literacies.

When it comes to languages, we see the same singularity, value, and power attached to “Standardized English”. Despite a few in academia making moves to acknowledge, inform, and include English languages, many are still holding on to the English that is deemed standard, and professional, thus becoming indicative of one‟s literacy or illiteracy which, in extension, is reflective of their value and position in the society. The singular approach when it comes to the English language is incorrect, problematic, and takes away from decades of rebuilding and repositioning colonized communities had to do after their white colonizers decided that they had done enough trade or missionary work. This notion of “white righteousness” turned into “white rightness” is among the root causes for Standardized English dominating and dictating professional or academic spaces, i.e. spaces of power and hierarchy. When I pronounced the word “preparatory” rather differently, I was met with, “What did you just say?” There then ensued a debate on what was the right pronunciation. While these conversations never had a sense of finality, it left me wondering what the right way to speak, or write really is, if such a thing even exists. It made me question what is, in fact, “Standard English”. Standard English is a term we have all heard of in our academic lives. While the Collins dictionary defines it as, “English which is characterized by idiom, vocabulary, etc., that is regarded as correct and acceptable by educated native speakers,” Merriam Webster defines the term as “English that with respect to spelling, grammar, pronunciation, and vocabulary is substantially uniform though not devoid of regional differences.” One can easily find these definitions to be contradictory, as the former implies the language being correct only when spoken as native speakers would, while the

latter definition makes space for differences that arise from English being a second language. As I grapple with these ideas and issues of linguistic dominance and injustice under the blanket of migration over the course of this research project, I think it‟s only accurate to address the term as “Standardized English” rather than “Standard English,” as the latter would suggest that what has been and is being pushed forth as the proper way to speak and write is indeed “standard.” The reality is that it was in fact “standardized” like many other aspects of the colonizer and their whiteness to maintain the hierarchical structures we move through in our institutions, and societies.

As a multilingual writer/speaker myself, I was instantly drawn to these differences and how they are perceived by the common masses, specifically those who enforce the notion of standard English over Other Englishes. The term „Other Englishes,‟ also known as „World Englishes,‟ refers to regional Englishes spoken by people of different backgrounds and cultures that are different from Standard English on various fronts, such as pronunciation, spelling, sentence structures and so on. Thus, it is no surprise that there are people who do not accept the birth and existence of Other Englishes. This constant conflict between standard English and Other Englishes has always intrigued me, considering that it was the colonizer‟s standard English that gave birth to Other Englishes. The fact that we can still have a heated conversation about pronunciations goes to show how, if not politically or geographically colonized, we are still verbally colonized. Unlike previous instances where removal of the colonizing factor was the solution, this is a situation far more complicated, as we deal with the dominance of standard English over Other Englishes. On one hand, we have solutions such as code-meshing to create space for World Englishes and other languages in settings dominated

by Standardized English. While on the other hand, we have to engage with people in positions of power who do not see or choose not to see the necessity of and urgency in pushing for verbal decolonization. We have to engage with people who will question the need for code-meshing as a practice in academic or professional settings given the time and effort that would have to go into it. In order to do so, it is important to understand the various ways code-meshing can be incorporated into standardized settings while understanding and pushing for others to understand how essential code-meshing is to deliver linguistic justice.

In the article "Other People‟s English; Code-Meshing, Code-Switching, and African-American Literacy," Vershawn Ashanti Young, Rusty Barrett, Y‟Shanda Young-Rivera, and Kim Brian Lovejoy engage in a conversation and discuss how code-meshing and code-switching impact students, and at large racism, along with the pros and cons of the same. The article also recounts Young‟s keynote address to the 2014 Northeast Writing Centers Association Conference in which he had brought to the table how code-switching takes a toll on African American students; and it is to this end that Young puts forth code-meshing as an ideal solution to the aforementioned:

> Instead of positioning students to switch between codes based on setting and audience, Young had proposed to the audience his term, "code-meshing." Code-meshing, he explains, is an approach to writing and interpreting texts that advocates for blending language codes in the classroom, rather than switching from one set of linguistic codes to another, depending on the "appropriate" social and discursive contexts. (Young et al. 1)

Young‟s proposal of code-meshing as a solution to code-switching and Canagarajah‟s perspective of the same as a catalyst in developing strong international ties does sound enticing for progression and the globalized world at large, but it definitely comes with a lot of questions and blank spaces. First, Young makes the claim that code-switching leads to "the burden of discourse assimilation," when it is one of the most impressive writing and speaking strategies multilinguals apply (Young et al. 1). Second, code-meshing apparently seems to be and has become the easy way out from years of racism and domination of Standard English over Other Englishes and languages. What we might be overlooking is whether it is the ideal solution for the long term.

To this end, Young et al point out how code-meshing fits into classrooms with ease once students are aware of strategies such as code-switching and code-meshing. They go on to make the following suggestion:

> Rather than building a language curriculum that assumes a Standard Academic English code deficiency in students, educators can work with students from a space that emphasizes how their language experiences are *already* engaging with different linguistic codes, both standard and disenfranchised. As Young-Rivera demonstrates, by helping students investigate the ways in which different language codes work in the world around them, especially the ways their home languages are actively influencing languages of power, a code-meshing curriculum can work against the ongoing historical elision that languages spoken by people of color in the United States experience, and take historically disenfranchised linguistic codes out of the marginalized Other space. (Young et al. 3)

The above-mentioned quotation goes on to suggest that developing curriculums that are based on code-meshing aids in demarginalizing Other Englishes and languages. This also agrees with Canagarajah‟s definition of code meshing, wherein it is viewed as a linguistic technique that will encourage and call for multilinguality in order to diversify the medium/language that dictates academia.

Yes, code-meshing is a pedagogy that creates space for the domination of standard English to be removed. But it is still impractical on the same grounds Young refers to in the aforementioned quotation, namely "setting and audience" (Young et al. 1). For instance, if I were to code-mesh while I presented to a classroom, the audience I would be addressing would have to understand Hindi and Malayalam, which are two entirely different languages, in addition to English. Now I could have an audience who understands all of the three codes that I would blend, but this will not or need not be the case in all of the settings I would encounter.

Y‟shanda Young-Rivera, in the article "Code-Meshing and Responsible Education in Two Middle School Classrooms," reflects on what fourth, fifth, and eighth grade students made of code-switching and code-meshing upon being introduced to these terms and their significance in understanding one‟s own individuality in writing and conversing in English. In an effort to introduce and show how "easy" and "flexible" incorporating code meshing into classrooms would be, Young-Rivera created daily lesson plans tailored for the project. The students were assigned homework "in which the young writers identify and interpret the code-meshing they encounter in the world" (Young et al. 3). When looking at this activity, we must take into consideration several factors before coming to a conclusion about code meshing and how it could potentially be incorporated

into academic settings. The most important factors would be the academic level it would be introduced at and the relation between our linguistic goals and time. The above activity takes place in a middle school and while I agree that, to take out verbal colonization, it is imperative to ensure that individuals grow up being educated about Other Englishes and languages, and their relation to Standard English, we must also think of how to deal with it at higher institutional levels, such as colleges and universities, as well as workplaces. In addition, it also matters what we are striving to achieve in what amount of time. It matters what goals are long term and short term. For instance, to implement code meshing in a diverse classroom would be more of a hindrance than progression. But to introduce code meshing at the kindergarten, for instance, would pave way for Other Englishes and languages to be viewed equally without having its richness and importance overshadowed by Standard English‟s dominance.

Yasminah Beebeejaun‟s article "Gender, urban space, and the right to everyday life" questions the sexist nature of city planning that forces men and women into cookie-cutter spaces, complete with gender-specific duties and chores. It gives literal meaning to "living in man‟s world" as these spaces and duties are neither equally distributed nor rewarded between the sexes. This inequality is visible in pay rates, disproportionate unpaid labor, and in the violence against women (Beebeejaun 323). The author also transcends the spatial aspect of "space" to define it as the element of an "intense social experience" (qtd. in 327), as the repetitive use of a space can cause people to feel a sense of belonging in that area. The oppressional and inhibiting trope of women *belonging* in the kitchen or in the home (because of their supposed ineptness outside of the house) can thus be assumed to be the product of sexist space planning, implicitly taking away from

the importance of household literacies. Similarly, we could look at the institutional, academic, and geographical designs around us and take note of how these spaces are non-inclusive of BIPOC, immigrants, and their cultures and languages. How can BIPOC and immigrants thrive or flourish in professional/academic environments that were always designed to either keep them out or to conform to the "standardized?" This could mean speaking and writing in Standardized English to find their literacies valued and given due space and weight. This could also mean assimilating into the standardized culture while rejecting their own cultures, languages, and literacies which extends into their identities. As a result of this, identity clash and conflict have now become a common occurrence among BIPOC and immigrants as they switch between codes of all kinds ranging from clothing to languages.

Bringing the marginalized to the center, I believe, is one way to think about standardized spaces and the literacies in these spaces. In this project, I want to bring to the forefront the identities of immigrants who have lived believing that their literacies and identities do not bring any value whatsoever to the table. I want to bring to the forefront the stories of immigrants who have never even thought of questioning being marginalized, and overlooked. Specifically, I see this research project as an attempt to help me understand my own family‟s immigrant journey, environment and community, and thus be more self-aware of how my identity has been impacted through both mine and my family‟s migration processes. Through my research, I intend to not only understand how both migration and its associated expectations within the family and community along with my own migration experiences have shaped and continue to shape

my identity, but also bring to light how devalued literacies, languages and cultures speak into the positionality of the marginalized and rigidly categorized immigrants in all spaces.

METHODOLOGIES

Annelies Moors, in her article "On Autoethnography," puts up for debate what is and what is not autoethnography. Considering that this is my first time venturing into autoethnography, Moors‟ article helped me ground and expand my understanding of autoethnography as a research methodology, while bringing to light the underlying complexities associated with the term‟s usage. The general definition of autoethnography can be summarized as a form of reflecting on oneself and applying one‟s experiences to understanding the larger picture, which could mean cultural, political, or social experiences. "On Autoethnography" not only questions the blanket usage of the term but also moves beyond the general definition to solidify what the term encompasses through a clear example. The author‟s discomfort with the blurred boundaries between ethnography and autoethnography is evident in her writing and conclusions. The discussions that come out of a research project where the researcher observed and participated within a community solely for the project are entirely different in comparison to the discussions that come out of a research project where the researcher has been interacting and moving within a community before the project. Many claim that the latter would result in a biased analysis of one‟s own experiences, when in reality it will only open doors to an understanding of the said community or environment in a way that is only possible through personal experiences. This is not to take away from the validity of an ethnographic research, but to dispel the idea of "biasness" attached to autoethnography especially when it comes from those pushed to the margins. Moors uses an example of a researcher who wears a face-veil to understand the experiences of women who wear face-

veils on the daily. While the researcher‟s intentions are of a good nature, Moors calls this a social experiment rather than an autoethnography.

> Whereas I understand the desire to reveal this hostility and how it affects the self, I am uncomfortable with the lack of discussion about how the researcher‟s experiences inevitably differ from those of women who wear a face-veil out of conviction. After all, when a researcher starts to wear a face-veil, she opts for a particular garment that she can take off whenever she feels the urge or the need to do so. But when one does so as an act of worship, as an intrinsic part of one‟s telos, then it is quite likely that this different intention structures one‟s experiences of public hostility in a different way… and the pressure to take it off will have different existential consequences… What is the value of engaging in this social experiment over and above doing research with face-veiling women? Does it really provide us with greater insight than if one listens carefully to the narratives of the women concerned? (Moors 3)

Moors‟ use of this example not only illustrates how autoethnography cannot overlap with social experiments and ethnography, but also goes to prove the devaluing of experiences that may arise when a "white non-Muslim researcher" is the only one speaking into the experiences of face-veiled women. This example coupled with Moors‟ questioning of when a research would be autoethnographic in nature illustrated to me how I should strive to position my personal experiences of migration along with the experiences of those around and within my community. To lose hold on either one of these would render this research project incomplete. Understanding migration and its effects on the self, be it positive or negative, is a personal, specific, and enlightening journey. Having experiences

of similar others who migrated and their perspectives of their selves will not only enrich my own understanding and reflection, but will also point to the differences in how these experiences are understood and interpreted within the same community based on factors such as age, motives for migration, socioeconomic context, and so on.

Joshua D. Atkinson, in his book *Journey into Social Activism: Qualitative Approaches*, dedicates a whole chapter to explore on how qualitative methods can be applied to research projects, specifically projects on activists/activist organization, as we move across online spaces.

Atkinson states how "qualitative research methods [can] help to gain insight into the processes involved in co-constructions of meaning, lived experiences, cultural rituals, and oppressive practices." (65). To me, this quote is balanced on the word "co-constructions." This was something I thought about a lot in my countless revisits to the interviews. What does it mean for me to co-construct meanings, and terms for these lived experiences? How do I understand, define, and speak into my migration experiences while drawing from the lived experiences of my parents" and preserving it as a whole, specifically in the meanings they assign to it, at the same time? To facilitate a space where my interviewees could reflect on their lived experiences, I wanted to be sure that I was drafting an interview script that allowed for "co-constructions of meanings" and "insight." Drafting the interview script was in itself a process that had to be given ample time and thought considering that I had to ensure that the questions or prompts were direct and not too technical to the point where it would be lost on the interviewees who are both unfamiliar to the terms I engage with.

MIGRANT IDENTITIES, LITERACIES, AND LANGUAGES

Before delving into how migration as a process impacts and shapes our identities, I believe it is necessary to acknowledge the privilege that comes with being able to think and engage with concepts of migration and identity. Interviewing my parents for this research project brought to light a popular perspective on migration among the many who had migrated because that was their one chance at creating better lives for themselves and their families. What takes priority for these immigrants is ensuring that their journeys were/are worth the ache of being away from families and homelands. To ponder about and speak into the negative or positive impacts on their identity unfortunately do not make it to the list. They are not actively or sometimes even passively trying to assert their identities, languages, and literacies in many of the spaces where they find themselves being devalued for what they bring to the table.

In my conversations with my mom and dad, Asha Roy and Roy Mathew, I came to realize how their ideas, perspectives, and experiences of migration vastly differ from mine. While my dad made the decision to migrate for a better career, my mom migrated because of her marriage. Although for different reasons, they were both pretty similar in their responses. They both agreed that migrating from a small town in Kerala, the southernmost state in India to Dubai, United Arab Emirates (U.A.E) will only offer better opportunities, better career, and in turn a better standard of living. In other words, migration to them was about climbing out of poverty and struggles. What‟s more? Migration has given them what they came in search for. There was never a time where they had negative thoughts on migration or their decision to migrate. While this may be the case for my parents, I am aware that there are many out there who migrate with

dreams and expectations packed into their suitcases only to be disappointed and in despair. This mainly holds true for men who migrate to Dubai or any other emirate in the U.A.E to work as labourers. Their stories mostly sing of loneliness and hardships. Working for long hours in the hot, unforgiving sun and having to come back to a room that houses four to six people, while being away from loved ones, can make life quite lonely and painful; add to this being looked down on because of the nature of their work and living conditions. All of this is to say that migration experiences can vary on many levels depending on our privileges. These can range from financial background before migration to the level of education. These financial and cultural capitals play crucial roles in setting immigrants up to achieve their migration dreams and expectations.

While interviewing both my parents gave me a fresh perspective on migration each time, conversing with my mom and understanding her migration process and journey were important to me. My own positionality as a female immigrant made it all the more essential for me to include her in this conversation. Her journey to where and who she is today is definitely and significantly varied in comparison to mine. But I had come to the conclusion that even in our different and varied migration stories and lived experiences, her story would be relevant as a woman of colour who migrated and pushed forward in spaces that devalued her literacies, and underestimated her because of the initial language barrier, and the consequent feelings of inferiority. In our chat, she talks into how migration shaped her identity. Migration allowed for her to grow into the spaces she inhabited. If it were not for migrating to Dubai and encountering other women of colour and varied backgrounds, she would not have had the chance to be as independent and confident today. Be it choosing to assimilate in terms of clothing or expanding her

comfort boundaries to accommodate matters/concepts/issues/beliefs that went against what was taught to her in extremely cultural and traditional settings accurately symbolic of a strict Indian household environment for young girls, she had been able to open herself up to the possibilities that has shaped her into the person, working woman, wife, and mother that she is today. She also brings up how migrating to Dubai has heavily impacted the parenting we received. While she grew up in a strict household where she had not stepped out to enjoy a day out with her friends until her marriage, she was ready to open her mind to accept, though not fully, the new societal culture she found herself and her children in; she wanted for us, her daughters, to have the freedom, choice, and voice that she did not have.

When asked about what she considers core aspects of her identity, she responded with the following keywords: “faith, caring for her family, and cooking.” This was when I also recognized that my mom, although a woman who prides herself on having her own income, always identifies as a mother and wife, first. She finds true happiness and joy in cooking for 30 people even when it involves being in the kitchen for 15 hours straight. While I always have respected and admired her household literacies, I could not bring myself to learn more than what I need to survive with regards to cooking. But how does my mom identifying as someone who enjoys cooking while refusing to acknowledge or assign to it the value that it truly deserves speak into gendered spaces and women‟s status/position, and ultimately my identity and association to those spaces as a South Asian woman?

To start with, it is necessary to examine how women‟s status or position within society have come about through various cultural, social, religious, and even geographic

factors; which when combined with the age, life stage, prestige and economic standing, compare rather poorly with the status of men (Spain). Daphne Spain, in her article on "Gendered Spaces and Women‟s Status" defines these spaces as yet another result emerging out of segregation based on societal roles assigned to men and women. This spatial element of gendered spaces has been the subject of much discourse as it implies that males and females have been given separate tasks and separate areas to perform those tasks. In other words, men have historically had access to more places of "value" than women did due to the sheer impossibility of women being allowed to obtain knowledge, rights or education early on. Only those women higher up in social standing were given the choice of bettering their position as they would have been able to afford to travel or study and acquire knowledge and experience, or create a space or "room of one‟s own" wherein they could practice and hone their creative skills (qtd. in Spain 141). Thus, Spain identifies two aspects of gendered spaces, namely, the geographic and architectural aspects with the former referring to the gendering of spaces in entirely separate areas (as with single-sex colleges) and the latter relating to gendered spaces within the same building (as kitchens are considered a feminine space while studies are considered masculine). I have been focusing specifically on the architectural aspect of gendered spaces to understand my aversion to identifying with cooking and my mom‟s denial of her own cooking literacy values. These are both again only serving to take away from the value that needs to be assigned to cooking/household literacies. While this is a hard pill to swallow and understand, it also is encouraging to know that the interview with my mom has pushed me further in my journey to understand what I consider to be

my literacies and why I do not or may not consider some of the practices that are significant to me on a personal level to be my literacies.

Traditional feminized literacies are and have been often devalued in today‟s social and political climate. The article “Gender, Labor Allocations, and the Psychology of Entitlement within the Home” by Laura Sanchez bolsters this phenomenon by analyzing the perceptions and misconceptions surrounding the division of household labor between spouses. Traditional, gender-specific values cause both men and women to “devalue women‟s housework and employment and perceive far more meaning in men‟s labor efforts” (Sanchez 534). Sanchez goes on to explain the „why‟ behind this gross devaluation of the feminized literacy of household tasks, attributing it to factors such as “structural discrimination and gender ideologies” (534). In other words, due to the common power structures within families as well as a largely patriarchal regard for men‟s labor, both women and men tend to view stereotypical feminine housework as less valuable, even if they provide indirect but equal economic benefit to the home and involve high levels of competency and skill (535).

In further corroboration of Sanchez‟s research, Carriero and Todesco delve into the economic and monetary value of household duties in their article, “Housework division and gender ideology: When do attitudes really matter?”. Several arguments on the higher regard for external employment over housework center on the amount of capital each category of work brings to the house. The authors suggest that the spouse who earns more money for the household (usually the male) traditionally expects the other (usually the female) to compensate by taking over all household tasks (1041). However, a 9-5 job may not necessarily be a fair equivalent of the round-the-clock chores

done at home. Furthermore, their study indicates that there is no evidence to suggest when the roles are reversed, "women who out-earn their partners do less of the housework" (Carriero and Todesco 1041). Therefore, many women tend to develop and practice household literacies alongside occupational literacies, and yet their contributions are less recognized and translate to lower income due to the non-egalitarian perception of women‟s/feminized literacies.

Taking into account this incongruence between assigned gender roles, it follows that men have been trusted with positions of power in society throughout history, while women were consequently meant to stay at home and fulfill their "reproductive roles" (Spain 138). While this may seem a little outdated for the times we are in, I am still identifying with a community where an "independent/modern woman" is only on the path to success if she is married by 25, and bears children before 30, all while killing it at work. Spain records a fifteenth century architect‟s perspective on the household as a gendered space with special emphasis on how even this space, while seemingly belonging to the woman, in fact gives ultimate control to the man of the house:

> Having given his wife apparent authority over the house on which his public authority depends, the paterfamilias consolidates his control by secreting the family documents- the interrelated financial and genealogical records-in a locked chest in his study. The whole economy of the household is literally written down at the hidden center of the space it organizes...The woman maintains a system without access to its secrets. (qtd. in 137)

Yet, there are two sides to the story of gendered household spaces. Qatari women, for example, consider their home their sanctuary where they are free to express themselves

and exercise control over their domestic space, as opposed to their surroundings which could be considered quite oppressive to them (Sobh and Belk 330). In this case, contrary to the restrictive, underappreciated space that the household is widely assumed to be, the home is symbolic of freedom and authority for women. And while my mom has her own income/career that she assigns great value to, she truly identifies with her household literacies without being aware of the fact that they are in fact literacies. This would also be why she finds it hard to assign value to the knowledge and skills she practices within the boundaries of her home and family, i.e. her "domestic" sphere.

Jamie White-Farnham, in her article "Rhetorical Recipes: Women‟s Literacies In and Out of the Kitchen," dissects why and how the women she interviews have come to undervalue literacies they practice at their homes. Her interviewees from the Red Hat Society, "a national social club for women over age fifty" to get away from the mundanity of everyday life, are all women who have relied on their professional literacies to "resist the conventional domestic roles and responsibilities they faced as young women in the late 1960s and early 1970s" (White-Farnham 25). This along with the fact that there were and are certain traditional, cultural, religious values that attach domestic roles and responsibilities to women would explain why White-Farnham‟s participants and many other women come to devalue literacy practices, specifically household literacies, that they perform daily (White-Farnham 25). Her conversation with her interviewees further establishes my aversion to attaching cooking to my identity and my mother‟s denial of the value attached to cooking literacies. White-Farnham uses the "traditionally „domestic‟ text, the recipe" to give these women a space to think about the household literacies they perform in a new light. Since finding out about "household literacies," I

have come to greatly value "recipes" as a core aspect of household/cooking literacies. This is not only because it involves reading and writing, which are considered as primary and the only literacies, but also because it is symbolic of and embodies many women‟s highly devalued knowledge, time, and energy spent in kitchens, usually located at the very back of a house or to a corner in many South Asian households.

White-Farnham introduces to us Donna who cooks for her family with "health and nutrition" as the values that govern her "instinctive cooking" (White-Farnham 26). Donna provides a detailed description of her cooking process and speaks into why she picks the ingredients that she uses. In using the term "instinctive cooking," we are brought back to the text, the recipe, on which White-Farnham‟s article is grounded. She considers cooking as something that comes to her. In other words, she engages in cooking as a process where she creates her own recipes with the natural ingredients that are available in her kitchen. While Donna bases her cooking on health and nutrition, Edna has to cook within a budget, while keeping in mind her "audience," who are all "big eaters" (White-Farnham 26). As Donna does, Edna narrates her process of cooking "for her family of five as very flexible" in the following manner:

> "I play it by ear. I don‟t worry about recipes because everything calls for garlic and onions." She credits her mother-in-law with "giving" her lots of recipes, but when I ask if I can see them, she says that "they show you or tell you, they don‟t write them down…not a recipe, something you wrote down, but a pinch of this or that…" To Edna, recipes are things one might "worry" about, adding complication to something that comes naturally to her. (White-Farnham 26-27).

Donna and Edna‟s literacy practices float around values that are core to them, and their past and present experiences along with their material conditions; material conditions, here, would entail ingredients available to them, money, time, and other tools of the sort. White-Farnham highlights the confidence these women carry in the space, i.e., kitchen, and their ease to work with what is available to them. Donna and Edna‟s fluidity in the kitchen illustrates a variation of street smartness in the household setting. White-Farnham looks into the work of Barton and Hamilton to map the similarities between Donna and Edna, and Rita, the latter‟s participant. None of the above-mentioned women strictly follow recipes. These women engage in what "Barton and Hamilton call the "interpretive" aspect of literacy," as we see how they tweak existing recipes to work with the material conditions they are in (White-Farnham 27).

While I do not share the same enthusiasm with my mom when it comes to cooking, what I do place value and sentiments on are her recipes. Granted that my mother does not care to acknowledge the knowledge and literacies she utilizes and practices in the kitchen nor does she consider them to be literacies of value. Her joy, and expertise when it comes to cooking is reflective of the value she personally attaches to the practice, but she is also aware of the society around her that assigns no value to an individual who can "only cook and clean;" hence, why she assigns value to her career and pushes to the sidelines her passion and skills associated to cooking. To me, writing down these recipes is another way to assign that value back to the household literacies she performs and practices on a daily basis after a full day of work.

While my conversations with my mom on her identity since migration were centered around household literacies, faith, and so much more, my interview with my dad

was not as layered as that of my mom‟s. Instead, his response to the interview questions shed light on his characteristics as an individual: simple, straightforward, and practical. This also meant that his answers were organized but rigid in the sense that it was not giving any more than necessary. It was also hard for me to find myself as an immigrant in his outlook on migration. Actually, this goes for both my parents‟ perspective on migration. While they focus only on the good that came out of migration and stresses on the importance of being ungrateful, I cannot help but look at migration through a larger lens personally for myself. I have found that I feel like I lose my identity quite easily and end up questioning my "self and identity" in the process of migration; add to this a dash of feeling like I do not belong anywhere I am for the most part. It was refreshing to hear my dad discuss assimilation, literacies, and his identity in the context of migration. Each time, his response would circle back to the point that he started from, which was that he takes himself to be a "simple man" who was blessed with the right opportunities through faith. His positive attitude towards his migration experiences comes from the fact that when he migrated he was a "normal man who had nothing to lose." Coming from poverty, he knew migration was his and family‟s ticket out of the standard of living they seem to be stuck in. During the interview, he speaks into his thought processes, and expectations before migration and how far off or accurate they were after physically migrating to Dubai.

> "Yeah, it [expectations] was there but actually I was thinking because so many people working in Dubai or other countries coming to our area [Kerala, India] - there were lot of people. They are coming and spending money because they are making a lot of money here … so we were thinking "oh if we are going there, we

> will get a lot of money from that job. So, when I came here my expectation was a better salary and a better life like that. But when I came here, I didn't get such a good job. I got an accountant job only but the salary was very less when I started my career here. My expectation was a little bit higher before coming here but when I reached here I understood almost all people are working on these same conditions which means it is not only for me. Everybody is doing with small salaries and when these people are coming to our home country they are borrowing from here -from their friends or from the bank or from the employer- this way they are borrowing and coming to their native places and spending from that. From their borrowings they are spending they are not actually making that much money here….because they want to show something in their places. They want to show they are something in their home country."
>
> - Roy Mathew

My dad"s reference to how his migration expectations were not met upon arrival followed by a peek into the general Keralite immigrant community who wants to "show they are something in their home country" calls for us to look at the rise in status and desirability associated with migration. This perception is not limited to the people who have not physically migrated, but is also a curse on immigrants, who might barely be making ends meet, who are now placed in a difficult position where they are looked down on if they do not have something "foreign" to claim as theirs (Nwankwo). For instance, every time I go back home, I encounter family and friends who take it upon themselves to enquire if I have an American accent now that I have been in the U.S. long enough, and as always I respond with a resounding no in the most Indian English accent I could come up with.

This pushes me to think about how BIPOC and immigrants are many times whitewashed to think less of their own cultures, and languages that make up their identity.

In thinking about literacies/languages and how they are valued or devalued before, during, and after migration, I think it is worth going back to the points about how financial and cultural capitals set us up to push forward or fall behind on our migration dreams and expectations. This is also exactly the difference between my migration experience and that of my parents‟. While my parents, especially my mom, migrated to Dubai speaking only one language, Malayalam, I migrated to the U.S. having command over multiple languages. I was provided the opportunity to better prepare myself for traditional success. When my parents initially and sometimes even today struggle with language, they were and are able to feel a sense of satisfaction and fulfillment with their migration journey because of the cultural capital they had cultivated back home in Kerala, India. With my mom‟s bachelor‟s degree and my dad‟s master‟s degree in accounting, they were able to achieve their migration dreams and expectations with time. But their journey to reach where they are today is riddled with people in professional settings who have looked down on them for not speaking "good/proper English." This not only affected their self-worth and confidence, but also to date makes them question themselves and the knowledge, skillset, and literacies they practice. On the other hand, my exposure to writing center articles, and writing courses have helped me understand the English I speak and write along with the accents, pronunciations, and other languages are all a part of me; they have helped me understand how these literacies and languages inform each other and impact my identity, the way I speak, formulate my thoughts, write, and so on and so forth. In having these conversations with my parents, what I found

interesting or even a bit frustrating is the unexpected resistance. The resistance to dethrone Standardized English. The resistance to reassign value to their own cultures, languages, and literacies. The resistance to appreciate themselves for the repertoire of literacies and languages they bring with them instead of seeing these as less than Standardized English. Sometimes we so easily forget that language is a mode of communication. As long as we can convey our messages, ideas, and arguments across to people of varied cultural and linguistic backgrounds, we can conclude that whichever language is used as the medium is serving its purpose in that specific context. The heavy emphasis on grammar, pronunciations, and what not in Standardized English along with the associated penalizing and devaluing when all we, as in people speaking other dialects of English, have done is make it our own is draining to say the least. When asked about feeling devalued/unappreciated or valued/appreciated for the literacies they practice or languages they speak, both my parents shared the response of feeling devalued because they were not fluent in English and how that has worked to make them feel humiliation and shame. But it is also worthy to note how both my parents spoke into feeling valued and proud of themselves for having come a long way in being able to speak and write in English since having migrated. While this is problematic at its core, it is also rewarding to see them assign value to their ability to assimilate, adapt, and learn as needed despite still having their English skills questioned at work.

CONCLUSION

The premise of this paper was to understand the impact of migration on the identity, literacy, and language of an immigrant. The process of migration is hard enough on its own without the added toil on one‟s perception of oneself due to the undervaluing or unappreciation of one‟s language and literary capabilities that often occur during the process of metaphorical migration which could also result in forced assimilation. Previous research delves deep into just how migration, while posing as a blessing in disguise to most people, can result in loneliness, hardship, and a lost sense of self/identity.

The interviews with my parents only prove the same, in that they do not feel as valued as their domestic counterparts and accept their subpar status in Arab society, simply due to their inability to “fluently” communicate in either Arabic or English. Further, more disparities occur given the genders of my parents, as each of their experiences are unique to their genders as immigrant women struggle harder to improve their negatively impacted self-worth because of how their literacies are undermined in both professional and personal spaces. However, both parents are in agreement that their lives and their families are better off for having migrated to the U.A.E, showing that this perspective is unique to those who migrated in search of better lives and succeeded in achieving what they came for.

While these experiences are relatively common to several migrant adults who travelled to make a living, they differ greatly from mine. My parents migrated to survive, making them more accommodating towards the hardships they faced, even if those hardships were unnecessary. As a second generation migrant student, I and many others

who have been granted the opportunity and privilege to study the effects of migration on and adversity faced by immigrants, are able to verbalize their/our difficulties and avoidable struggles which are reflected in the acceptance (or lack thereof) of the diverse languages and literacies we bring to the table.

INTERVIEW SCRIPT

1. Demographic info
    a. Name
    b. DOB
    c. POB
    d. Place of rearing
    e. Parents‟ schooling and occupation
    f. Schools attended
    g. Higher education
    h. Degrees
    i. Languages
    j. Past occupations in previous country
2. What was/were your reason/reasons for migration?
3. Did you have a migration dream? If yes, how did it pan out? If no, before you migrated, i.e. when you started the process of your migration, did you have any expectations/inkling as to how this process would go?
4. Tell me some core aspects that make up your identity and why you consider them so.
5. Tell me some practices/skills that are valuable to you/hold in high esteem. What are some aspects of you that you hold in high esteem/consider as important and defining? (professional or personal literacies)

6. A moment(s) where you felt or were made to feel these particular skills or practices you value were not enough/needed/appreciated/looked down on. (professional or personal literacies)
7. Describe a moment(s) where you felt valued because of a particular or combination of practices/skillset. (professional or personal literacies)
8. Some of the major developments in your life since migration.
9. What do you think you as an individual lost and gained in the process of migration? How has migration shaped your identity?

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