

IMMIGRATION, CLASS AND RACISM: AN INTERSECTIONAL ANALYSIS OF JAIN'S *OUR BEST INTENTIONS*

Nida Zaidi,

M.Phil English, Institute of Southern Punjab, Multan, Pakistan

Joshan Afshan

M.Phil English, Institute of Southern Punjab, Multan, Pakistan

Dr. Sajid Ali,

Associate Professor of English, Govt. Islamia Graduate College,

Faisalabad, Pakistan

Abstract

*The present study aims to analyze the complex interaction of race and class as portrayed in *Our Best Intentions* by Indian American fiction writer Vibhuti Jain. This complex interaction of race, class and gender has a significant impact on the lives and relationships of immigrants in the United States. The present study draws on the notions of intersectional theory propounded by Fathi (2017) employed in her book *Intersectionality, Class and Migration*. It focuses on the interconnectedness of social issues and various social identities such as race, gender, class and migration, and examines how they intersect to shape individuals' experiences. The findings of the study reveal that how race, class and gender are intertwined in the immigrant's experience in American society. Based on these insights, the study offers some suggestions to direct initiatives aimed at creating a society that is more just and equitable. The study further offers to promote concrete steps that may lead to societal improvement by addressing the issues found in the experience of immigrants in the United States.*

Key words: Intersectionality, immigration, racism, class, *Our Best Intentions*

1.Introduction

Racism, immigration, and class are intricately linked together that form significant impact on both the individuals and society at large. The subject of racism frequently emerges in Indian American literature, where it has been thoroughly investigated and deconstructed in numerous fiction and non-fiction works, shedding light on the experiences and challenges faced by individuals of all racial backgrounds. Indian American authors have endeavored to confront and challenge this pervasive issue through their compelling storytelling, prompting readers to confront their own biases and prejudices.

To address issues of intersectionality, Parikh (2015) examines how Indian American literature consistently explores the intersections of race, gender, class, and sexuality within the Indian American experience. Beyond fiction, various forms of artistic expression such as artifacts, objects, images, and visual representations also bear witness to the significance of immigration and class in Indian American literature, symbolizing the contributions made by Indian immigrants and Indian Americans to American society. According to Patel (2021), the Indian American experience is primarily of immigration, making it a relatively recent phenomenon and comparing it to the experiences of White, Latinx, Black, and East Asian populations. Overall, Indian American literature offers a compelling exploration of immigration and class, showcasing the experiences of Indian immigrants in the United States and their impact on American society. Through the author's work, readers gain insights into the challenges faced by immigrants, the complexities of cultural identity, and the reshaping of national narratives.

Our Best Intentions (2023) in Indian American literature is a captivating drama that presents multiple perspectives. Jain's (2023) debut novel, simultaneously a gripping page-turner and a personal portrayal of an immigrant family, delves into the rapid dissolution of friendships, jobs, communities, and individual lives when confronted with the toxins of privilege and racial

bias. Jain, a professional lawyer in New York city, presents her first novel, *Our Best Intentions* (2023), through the lens of two Indian American characters engaging in conversation with an Uber driver about the latest news in the New York suburbs. By placing these characters at the heart of the novel's narrative, she offers a portrayal of the Indian American experience, reflecting on identity, race, and privilege in America.

Jain's thrilling debut novel, *Our Best Intentions* (2023), recounts the tale of an immigrant family embroiled in a criminal investigation. It is a gripping story about a father, named Babur and her daughter named Angie who re-examine their familial bonds and place in the community. Babur, the proprietor of the startup Uber company, is a single parent relentlessly pursuing his dream of success in America. The story centers around Angie an introverted teenager who finds her classmate Henry stabbed and bleeding on the football field. The police focus their investigation on Chiara, a runaway black girl who was not properly enrolled in public high school yet she disappears following the stabbing and leaving the family in the mess of issues and tragedies.

This study employs the notions of intersectional theory propounded by Fathi (2017) to analyze Jain's *Our Best Intentions*. Its significance lies in its exploration of the connections between social identities and issues, particularly concerning immigration, racial dynamics, and class dynamics. Intersectionality highlights the influence of various variables such as gender, race, class, ethnicity, caste, and physical appearance. Jain's (2023) novel adeptly examines issues including privilege, elitist hypocrisy, and bias towards certain classes and races, as well as the challenges of assimilating into a new society and culture, particularly for first and second-generation immigrants in the United States.

1.1 Research objectives

The objectives of the present study are:

1. To analyze the challenges faced by immigrants which influence their lives and relationships in the novel *Our Best Intentions* (2023).
2. To examine the intersectional dynamics between immigration, racism, and class in the novel *Our Best Intentions* (2023).

1.2 Research Questions

1. How do the immigrants face challenges of race and class as depicted in Jain's *Our Best Intentions* (2023)?
2. How does Jain's *Our Best Intentions* (2023) shed light on the interconnectedness and interplay of social identities and issues like immigration, racism, and class?

2.Literature Review

Singh (1996) explores the diversity of the Indian American community, with its many regional, linguistic, and religious backgrounds, as illustrated in Indian American literature. It highlights the diversity of experiences among Indian Americans by reflecting the rich tapestry of Indian culture, languages, and traditions. In Indian American literature, the issue of belonging and the desire for identity is prevalent. Self-identification, cultural identity, and the conflict between personal goals and social expectations are all issues that writers deal with. Numerous Indian American writers explore the immigrant experience, describing the voyage from India to America, the difficulties encountered there, and the process of acclimating to a new cultural and social environment. Desai (1999) analyses the lives of Indian characters in India and the United States despite the author not living there herself. The intersections of gender, family dynamics, and cultural expectations are extensively discussed in the book.

Alexander (2002) despite being an Indian native, lived most of her life in the US. Her poetry frequently explores the difficulties associated with being a woman, an immigrant, and someone of color. She explores issues of displacement, hybridity, and the confluence of various identities in her writings. Romero (2008) analyzes a specific immigration raid and its aftermath, which involved an internal investigation of the police department involved an inquiry by the state attorney's office, and two lawsuits. The gathered documents contain detailed information that indicates certain state practices that create an atmosphere of intimidation and stigmatization for families with mixed immigration statuses. Berg (2010) opines that Americans express a range of attitudes toward immigrants and immigration policy. As everyone tries to prove their innocence, the affluent town of Kitchewan, New York, gets caught up in a web of social politics, rumors, and underhanded power struggles.

Chun, Lipsitz & Shin (2013) explore how intersectionality permeates social justice movements; particularly those led by women of color, and are present in both their theoretical and practical activities. Social movement organizations view intersectionality as a radical but workable tactic because the fundamental issues that black women face are also intersectional and radical. Grice & Parikh (2015) examine that Indian American literature frequently explores the intersections of race, gender, class, and sexuality within the Indian American experience to address intersectionality issues. The difficulties experienced by people at these crossroads and the distinctive perspectives they bring to the table are highlighted by the authors.

Srivastava (2015) examines Lahiri's collection of short stories (1999) and explores the lives of Indian immigrants in the United States while also addressing issues of identity, cultural displacement, and the difficulties experienced by people who are living in two different worlds. Liu (2019) analyzes that Canada chooses immigrants depending on how they might enhance the knowledge-driven economy of the nation. Through neo-liberal control, this hiring procedure commodifies immigrants by showing the symbiotic relationship between labor and immigration. There are three ways that this review contributes. First, a hierarchical skill regime based on skin color rather than qualifications continues to be fundamentally racialized. Second, while they struggle to find a good job, negotiate a work-life balance, and take care of their families, female immigrants face power dynamics that restrict their professional options and impose intersecting restrictions based on race, gender, and class. The last and third point is that gender and race are highly interlinked.

The novel *Our Best Intentions* (2023) is a tragic portrayal of a father and a daughter attempting to comprehend, improve upon, and fit in within a complex net of social fabric, class, and racial divide. Jain was particularly interested in the idea of Asian and Indian immigrants who pose as model minorities to blend in yet are never truly accepted by society. She also explores the differences between wealth, privilege, and race. Jain (2023) explains how each character's anxieties and intentions are influenced by privilege, color, and status, and how their best intentions are put to risk as the police look for the criminal and the community strives to dominate the narrative that explains why this crime was committed.

3.Theoretical Framework

The present study is of qualitative, descriptive and interpretive in nature. The present study has used Fathi's framework employed in her book *Intersectionality, Class and Migration* (2017) that focuses on class identities, belongingness and gender issues. It looks at the contradictory constructions of middle-class professional women's race, gendered and class identities that are frequently left out of more conventional intersectionality. Fathi (2017) argues that feelings of

non-belonging affect the individuals negatively and the people express belonging to where they think they can become part of the social system. This book is about class analysis through the everyday experiences of highly skilled migrants who should all feel part of British society. “My intention here is to bring back class experiences to feminist analysis to better understand identities and positionalities after migration by focusing on personal narratives and their intersection with other elements of the lives of migrant women featured in this book”(Fathi, 2017, p. 1).

Fathi (2017) states, “Racialisation is a broad term and has been used widely in racial and ethnic studies, here I use it more to the experiences of being a doctor and to class identities” (Fathi, 2017, p. 142). She further says “The experience of being racially treated and put in less advantaged positions when compared to English counterparts is important when thinking about the dynamics of race relations and of belonging to British society” (Fathi, 2017, p. 142).

Fathi (2017) highlights the struggle and challenges faced by migrants about gendered growing up, performing, racialisation, place-making, and belonging. Intersectionality emerged from critical race studies and describes a multidimensional relationship between race, gender, and other oppressive systems that coexist while still allowing privilege in other areas. Intersectionality is relative because it shows how race, gender, and other factors intersect to impact people's experiences. Cho, Crenshaw & McCall (2013) also claim how gender, race, and other forms of power in politics and academia play a significant role in intersectionality.

4. Textual Analysis

4.1 Challenges faced by Migrants

The dynamics of race and class influence the immigration system in the United States in addition to laws and policy. From a racial standpoint, some racial and ethnic groups have been disproportionately impacted by historical patterns of discrimination and exclusion, which are reflected in the immigration system. As in the chosen text *Our Best Intentions* (2023), Jain mentions about Angie, “From childhood to the present, she often finds herself fixated on fitting in, erasing or muting any difference between herself and everyone around her, being like everyone else, even though she’s not...” (Jain, 2023, p.197). Fathi (2017) explores such narratives that view others as lacking the ability to become like us.

Chris Collin, a High school boy, and friend of Henry talks to his schoolmate just to let her down because she is an Indian migrant girl and he is superior to her. Chris says, “You are just an ugly, loser Indian kid who....smells likelike a swimming pool” (Jain, 2023, p. 191). The statement contains several identity indicators, including physical appearance (ugly), age (kid), and race (Indian). The statement suggests power imbalance and the use of pejorative adjectives implies that the speaker may believe they are better than the person being addressed. This results from racial, or perceived physical attractiveness-based social hierarchies.

He further says in a burst, “If you’re going to go around pretending that you’re better than everyone else, you should know what everyone thinks of you” (Jain, 2023, p. 191). This shows immigrants’ place in American society. Jain (2023) shows that migrants struggle and face challenges as they are misfit in American society. She shows through the character of Angela and her father Bobby that how the people react or respond to the migrant families. Angie catches a whiff of pool chemicals and feels a flash of shame. She remembers how Chris comments about her that she smells like a swimming pool. The social integration of immigrants is a multifaceted process influenced by various factors, including ethnic, residential, school segregation, and socioeconomic deprivation. As Fathi (2017) claims that immigrants can never become British

subjects which may imply a kind of agency and belonging becomes even more indicative of her alienation; it means that a person would become a British object, that is, through the naturalization process. Fathi questioned one of her interviewees about whether she would converse with her future children at home in *Farsi* (Persian) or in English. She says that her future children may speak their native tongue but English speakers view Indians who do the same as having a problem.

Jain (2023) depicts migrant's struggle through her character Angie who "feels a spike of non-quite-nostalgia for her younger days, when she'd gazed at the display cases and the bust with wonder at how her town used to belong to people who'd now be entirely out of place"(Jain, 2023, p. 195). Fathi (2017) concentrates on the importance of privileged positioning within a marginal category (i.e. migrant). The societal practices to which people are subjected may obscure the active decision-making of lived experiences within ethnic categories. As Henry, the stabbed white boy, mocks Angie instead of thanking her for helping him out by calling 9/11. He calls her "Kitchwan's mightiest Indian" (Jain, 2023, p.109). She was continually reminded that she did not belong to there. Fathi (2017) argues that being a migrant, a woman, and having been unemployed at some point in their lives (between the time arriving in the UK and receiving their accreditation) can all lead to emotions of alienation, helplessness, and inferiority. It is important to consider how these policies contribute to the maintenance of racial and socioeconomic hierarchies within society.

Immigration policy evaluation requires a deep analysis of the racial and class dimensions that are embedded within these policies. Firstly, immigration restrictions disproportionately affect people of color, perpetuating racial discrimination. As the ongoing significance of race and ethnicity in the United States is undeniable, the experiences of immigrants are often shaped by their racial backgrounds. These policies create social, symbolic, and racialized boundaries between eligible citizens and non-citizens, further widening the racial divide in society. Understanding these racial dynamics is essential in assessing the impact of immigration and recognizing how they uphold systematic racism.

Chiara Thompkin, the only black girl at Kitchwen High, being accused of stabbing a white schoolboy, talks to an Indian girl for the first time in a blunt way and makes her realize that she is misfit for the American society by her name and her appearance as well. Chiara curiously investigates, "You look Indian...Why's your name Angela, then? Shouldn't it be somethingIndian?"(Jain, 2023, p. 27). Upon this, Angie and her father decide to change the name to be acceptable in American society.

Angie and her dad made a conscious decision to change her name from Anjali to Angela when she changed elementary schools when they moved from the house with a big garden and empty bedrooms to Lakeview Terrace. The name change was meant to help her fit in with the school kids, officially, but Angie knew that there was more to it (Jain, 2023, p. 153).

Endorsing the point, Fathi (2017) argues that immigrants like myself need acceptance in various spheres of life and society. Even while it may be viewed as a kind of capital in other contexts or eras as well as by the individuals themselves, class loses its importance when it is not acknowledged by others. As a result, having their class words misunderstood by migrants will impair their sense of citizenship and belonging. Fathi (2017) argues that the concept of belonging is closely intertwined with the intersection of British middle-classness, emphasizing integration and assimilation within a particular space. Fathi (2017) narrates her interviewee who was the

most overt example of racialization. She contrasts her life as an adult in Britain with her life as a youngster in a Scandinavian nation. She remembers being singled out as a little girl due to her Eastern appearance. She thinks that blending in is essential for success as a migrant. Fathi (2017) further narrates that she had lightened her hair when she was younger, educated herself to the highest level, and learnt to speak the language like a native to become invisible.

Babur, flashes with happiness to have the opportunity for Angie in the form of a scholarship offered by the McClearys' family, deliberates cheers but disappointed to know that Angie doesn't want to avail that opportunity. For her, *it is a gag* but for Babur, it is their business. Angie tries to convince her father not to accept their offer. She says, "Dad, this limits what we can say. Like a gag order" (Jain, 2023, p.161). Speech restrictions in the family setting can have an impact on relationships and the formation of personal identities. It might influence how the speaker negotiates their freedom of expression, expresses their autonomy, and moves through power relations within the family. Jain (2023) mentions in the text that "His American daughter has adopted this country's confounding habit of being obsessed with freedom, even when there are certain tangible benefits to being tethered" (Jain, 2023, p.161). The statement indicates a cultural stereotype or perception about Americans valuing freedom highly. The American daughter is depicted as embodying American cultural values, which are perceived as conflicting with the values of the country she is in.

Babur wants to achieve the American dream because he belongs to a struggling middle-class family. As he blushed, "I—We---accepted the generous offer" (Jain, 2023, p.165). This was a tremendous opportunity for Babur. Weber (1968) differentiates between status groups and classes by referring to the former as communities that have a particular lifestyle and the latter as economically differentiated groups. Fathi (2017) refers to these status lifestyles as class-coded performances. Being 'a middle-class woman' she entails 'living a middle-class life' by using certain performances to mark classed lifestyle. Marginalized groups encounter specific challenges in the immigration system, especially those from poor socioeconomic backgrounds. These encounters frequently involve heightened monitoring, racial profiling, incarceration, and expulsion. Additionally, marginalized communities could encounter more difficulties getting legal aid and counsel, which makes them even more vulnerable within the system. For marginalized communities, the interplay of race and class within the immigration system increases their disadvantages.

Fathi (2017) examines that firstly, the racialized groups of people conceal class, but not everyone in the same way. In her story, race is classified, and some groups are unable to achieve middle-class position even after becoming professional subjects. Secondly, knowledge of race and class results in the internalization of power structures and those categories are continuous and fixed, which is connected to a fixed identity, ensuring that 'the other' will always be 'the other'.

Fathi (2017) examines that the role of race and class in the immigration system extends beyond individual experiences to broader structural inequalities. These structural inequalities are perpetuated by the ways in which citizenship status and resource distributions are determined. Furthermore, Babur continues, "Even if I stop sleeping and worked even more, saved even more, I don't think I could afford some of the things you might want, things I want for you. I can't afford things like the McClearys have" (Jain, 2023, p. 178). As the sources suggest, discriminatory practices faced by immigrants, particularly those from marginalized racial and

ethnic groups, are influenced by factors such as social structures, racial hierarchies, and economic inequalities.

4.2 Interconnectedness and interplay of social identities

Oppression and types of discrimination overlap to generate individual experiences that can be improved by recognizing the intersectionality of identities. As Jain (2023) highlights in her book through one of her characters Chiara who furiously screams, “Give me my book back, you piece of white trash” (Jain, 2023, p. 262). Also, by looking at the effects of intersecting identities, we may identify and deal with the particular obstacles and structural issues that member of marginalized groups face.

Fathi (2017) examines that different classes and classed-identities emerge in society as a result of both inclusion and exclusion. Nevertheless, categorized paths are established and normalized to identify and exclude those who are unable to join the group ‘Us’. The goal of performances and class-coded activities is to establish a status group with exclusive members. These people have similar lifestyles, are proficient in a particular language, and know how to perform. Consequently, one must acquire a certain level of expertise, be affiliated with an organization, and have some degree of regulatory authority to join this group. The way, that communal identities are essential for providing a sense of belonging to an individual, integrating her into their social spaces, and ensuring her comfort through various means, is related to this inclusion in the construction of the ‘We’ and exclusion in the formation of the ‘Other’.

“Angie feels surge of nostalgia for their friendship, their jokes, swimming together, hanging out at Sam’s house,...she misses having someone who breaks up the monotony of her life and who makes her feel like she fits in” (Jain, 2023, p. 336). It accentuates Angie's intense yearning for her friendship with Sam and the advantages it brings to her. Angie's fond memories of their friendship imply that she and Sam had a profound bonding. Research on social connectivity and nostalgia supports this, stating that memories evoked by nostalgia frequently show the self-surrounded by close individuals (Lasaleta et al., 2014). For Angie, the memories of her friendship with Sam are probably going to bring up feelings of belonging and social connectedness.

Mixed-status families may experience additional discrimination and obstacles because of their migrant status in addition to other social identities like race or class, which can pose special challenges and hazards for them. A junior named Thalia said to Angie, “You should have been there for Chiara” Thalia continued, “But yeah, like you care. It was stupid of me to think someone *like you* might care about what’s fair and right” (Jain, 2023, p. 244). People like Thalia misunderstand Angie’s concern about Chiara and blame her for not being a part of the protest or not doing good to help her. “The thing about being alone and universally disliked, Angie’s discovered, is that her days feel hollow, empty pointless. Especially since she stopped swimming”(Jain, 2023, p. 245). Fathi (2017) explores that intersecting the emergence of disparities between privileged and underprivileged migrants are worldwide systems of exploitation and inferiorization, as well as oppressive structures like racism, patriarchy, and class dominance. In addition to class, color, ethnicity, gender, and ability all play a role in the experiences of middle-class and working-class migrants.

5. Findings of the Study

- The findings of the study reveal that how race and class are intersectional, as illustrated in Jain's novel *Our Best Intentions* (2023). Angie and her father Babur are two examples of

Indian American characters that show how difficult it may be for them to fit in with society.

- The study also emphasizes how immigrants are thought to have a detrimental effect on the wages and job prospects of native-born Americans. The integration process for migrants is made more difficult by this economic disparity, especially when racial dynamics and class divide come together.
- The study further reveals the interplay of tales of Fathi's (2017) scientific work and Jain's (2023) novel. Both illustrate the connectivity and interplay of social identities, underscoring the complexity of human experiences. Both the authors emphasize how different identities interact to shape people's lives and relationships in a society.

6. Conclusion

To sum up, the obstacles encountered by migrants, especially those belonging to marginalized racial and ethnic groups, are intricately linked to the dynamics of race and class inside the US immigration system. Immigration legislation such as the Mexican Repatriation Act and the Chinese Exclusion Act reflect historical patterns of discrimination and exclusion that have disproportionately affected certain ethnic groups. In addition to making it more difficult for certain groups to enter the nation, this has helped to maintain unfavorable opinions and stereotypes about them. In addition to being felt on an individual basis, the intersectionality of race and class is intricately entwined with the larger structural injustices of the immigration system. Findings of the study further reveal that systemic inequities are influenced by resource allocation and citizenship status. While those from lower socioeconomic origins encounter additional obstacles, those from higher socioeconomic classes may find it easier to negotiate and navigate the system.

References

- Alexander, M. (2002). *Illiterate Heart*. New York: Northwestern University Press.
- Berg, J. A. (2010). Race, class, gender, and social space: Using an intersectional approach to study immigration attitudes. *The Sociological Quarterly*, 51(2), 278-302.
- Cho, S., Crenshaw, K. W., & McCall, L. (2013). Toward a field of intersectionality studies: Theory, applications, and praxis. *Signs: Journal of women in culture and society*, 38(4), 785-810.
- Chun, J. J., Lipsitz, G., & Shin, Y. (2013). Intersectionality as a social movement strategy: Asian immigrant women advocates. *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, 38(4), 917-940.
- Desai, M. (1999). Book Reviews. *Review of Development and Change*, 4(2), 353-355.
- Fathi, M. (2017). *Intersectionality, Class and Migration: Narratives of Iranian Women Migrants in the U.K.* Palgrave Macmillan US.
- Grice, H., & Parikh, C. (2015). *Feminisms and Queer Interventions into Asian America*. In *The Cambridge Companion to Asian American Literature* (pp. 169-182). Cambridge University Press.
- Jain, V. (2023). *Our Best Intentions*. New York: William Morrow.
- Lasaleta, J. D., Sedikides, C., & Vohs, K. D. (2014). Nostalgia weakens the desire for money. *Journal of Consumer Research*, 41(3), 713-729.
- Lahiri, J. (1999). *Interpreter of Maladies*. Boston: Mariner Books.
- Liu, J. (2019). The precarious nature of work in the context of Canadian immigration: An intersectional analysis. *Canadian Ethnic Studies*, 51(2), 169-185.
- Patel, A. (2021). The Indian American Experience: A Contemporary Immigrant Perspective. *Journal of Cultural Dynamics*, 18(3), 245-260.
- Romero, M. (2008). The inclusion of citizenship status in intersectionality: What immigration raids tells us about mixed-status families, the state and assimilation. *International Journal of Sociology of the Family*, 131-152.
- Singh, J. G. (1996). *Colonial narratives/cultural dialogues: "discoveries" of India in the language of colonialism*. NY: Routledge.
- Srivastava, S. (2015). Identity Crisis and Diasporic Experiences in Jhumpa Lahiri's Short Story Collections. *Dialogue: A Journal Devoted to Literary Appreciation*, 11(02), 42-52.