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"Unseen and unheard" : representations of mental illness in contemporary American immigrant literature

Ellen D. Stuart

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ABSTRACT

“UNSEEN AND UNHEARD”: REPRESENTATIONS OF MENTAL ILLNESS IN CONTEMPORARY AMERICAN IMMIGRANT FICTION

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Focusing on two novels, Wendy Law-Yone's *The Coffin Tree* and Julia Alvarez's *How the Garcia Girls Lost Their Accents*, this analysis employs a framework drawn from research on mental health, which recognizes the cumulative impact of the immigrant's experiences through the process of migration on his/her development of mental illness by dividing migration into three stages: pre-migration, peri-migration, and post-migration. Because each stage carries its own set of factors potentially increasing the immigrant's vulnerability to mental illness, the experiences of the individual characters during the stages of migration are examined, as are their experiences of specific mental illnesses. Reading immigrant fiction through this framework reveals the depth of the immigrant experience and fully exposes the dark side of immigration, the devastating mental and emotional impact, which for some proves to be catastrophic. Mainstream cultural notions of the immigrant narrative are subverted: there is no hopeful departure from the old world to the welcoming shores of America; there is no achievement of the "American Dream." Instead, there is darkness, fear, instability, and madness.

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“UNSEEN AND UNHEARD”: REPRESENTATIONS OF MENTAL ILLNESS IN
CONTEMPORARY AMERICAN IMMIGRANT LITERATURE

BY

ELLEN D. STUART

A DISSERTATION SUBMITTED TO THE GRADUATE SCHOOL
IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS
FOR THE DEGREE
DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH

Dissertation Director:
Ibis Gomez-Vega

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DEDICATION

To Ellison and Quinn.

*Hold fast to dreams
For if dreams die
Life is a broken-winged bird
That cannot fly.
Hold fast to dreams
For when dreams go
Life is a barren field
Frozen with snow.*

-- Langston Hughes, "Dreams"

TABLE OF CONTENTS

I.	INTRODUCTION	
A.	Background: Madness and Literature.....	1
B.	Immigration and Mental Illness.....	6
C.	The Stages of Migration.....	9
1.	Pre-migration.....	9
a.	Biological Vulnerability.....	10
b.	Psychological Vulnerability.....	11
c.	Social Vulnerability.....	11
d.	Cultural Connectedness.....	13
e.	Voluntary/Involuntary Departure.....	13
2.	Peri-migration.....	16
3.	Post-migration.....	17
a.	Language Proficiency.....	17
b.	Culture Shock.....	18
c.	Socioeconomic Status.....	19
d.	Aspirations v. Reality.....	21
e.	Social Support.....	21
f.	Religion.....	23

4.	The Emergence of Mental Illness.....	24
D.	Conclusion.....	25
II.	THE CATASTROPHIC IMPACT OF ISOLATION: WENDY LAW-YONE'S <i>THE COFFIN TREE</i>	
A.	Background: Not Your Typical Immigrant Narrative.....	28
B.	The Stages of Migration: From Burma to New York.....	38
1.	Pre-migration: A Decaying Foundation.....	39
	<i>The Narrator: Alienated and Abused</i>	
a.	Psychological Vulnerability.....	39
b.	Social Vulnerability.....	49
c.	Cultural Connectedness.....	52
	<i>Shan: The Seeds of Madness</i>	
	Biological Vulnerability.....	52
a.	Psychological Vulnerability.....	53
b.	Social Vulnerability.....	55
c.	Cultural Connectedness.....	56
	<i>The Narrator and Shan: Shaken from Slumber</i>	
a.	Involuntary Departure.....	57
2.	Post-Migration: Lost in the Urban Jungle.....	60
a.	Language Proficiency.....	60
b.	Culture Shock.....	62

c.	Socioeconomic Status.....	67
d.	Aspirations v. Reality.....	68
e.	Social Support.....	70
3.	The Emergence of Mental Illness: Suffering in Isolation.....	74
	<i>Shan's Descent into Schizophrenia</i>	74
	<i>The Narrator's Descent into Psychotic Depression</i>	82
C.	Conclusion.....	93
III.	VULNERABILITY, MENTAL ILLNESS, AND THE IMMIGRANT CHILD: THE EXPERIENCES OF YOLANDA AND SANDRA IN JULIA ALVAREZ'S <i>HOW THE GARCIA GIRLS LOST THEIR ACCENTS</i>	
A.	Background: Time for Deeper Exploration.....	95
B.	The Stages of Migration: From Sand to Cement.....	110
1.	Pre-migration: Safe Within These Walls.....	111
a.	Biological Vulnerability.....	111
b.	Psychological Vulnerability.....	112
	<i>Yolanda: The Kitten and the Gun</i>	112
	<i>Sandra: The Artist</i>	116
c.	Social Vulnerability.....	120
d.	Cultural Connectedness.....	122
e.	Involuntary Departure.....	124
2.	Post-migration: A Gaping Hole.....	127

a. Language Proficiency.....	127
b. Socioeconomic Status.....	130
c. Culture Shock.....	134
d. Social Support.....	142
3. The Emergence of Mental Illness: Nowhere Left to Hide.....	147
<i>Yolanda's Decent into Psychosis</i>	148
<i>Sandra's Decent into Schizophrenia</i>	155
C. Conclusion.....	161
IV. CONCLUSION.....	163
WORKS CITED.....	178

I. INTRODUCTION

I withdrew in effect to the back of a thick one-way mirror where, believing myself to be of a piece with the observable world, I mimicked its populace and followed its ways, when all the time I was sealed off, unseen and unheard, in solitary confinement of my own making.
–Wendy Law-Yone, *The Coffin Tree*

A. Background: Madness and Literature

The field of American immigrant literature is vast, encompassing texts written by those who make the journey from their homelands to the United States, as well as texts written by the first generation born in America. The current project narrows the scope to texts that are both written by immigrants and contain characters who migrate themselves and experience, to varying degrees, mental illness. The analysis examines the experiences of the characters during the relevant stages of migration, identifying factors making them more vulnerable to, and their specific experiences of, mental illness. I am not a psychologist, and this project is not intended as a scientific contribution to or critique of the research regarding immigrant mental health. I intend, rather, to illustrate the benefit to both fields of analyzing contemporary American immigrant literature through the application of the most recent and accepted knowledge regarding immigrant mental health in the hopes of further enlightening our understanding of the immigrant experience.

The connection between literature and the various mental health disciplines lies in the exploration of the human mind. As literary critic and novelist David Lodge notes, “literature is the record of human consciousness, the richest and most comprehensive we have. [...] Works of literature describe in the guise of fiction the dense specificity of personal experience, which is always unique, because each of us has a slightly or very different personal history, modifying every new experience we have; and the creation of literary texts recapitulates this uniqueness” (10-11). The sentiment is shared by many mental health researchers and professionals. As Paul Crawford and Charley Baker assert, “Psychiatry studies the human mind within an increasingly biological, medicalised paradigm, yet it focuses on the same concerns as literature – human experience, reactions to events, emotions, behaviour and affect. The synergism between literature and psychiatry seems clear” (237-238).

Like psychological and psychiatric research, which examines “not only how the mind functions, but how, to whom, and why it sometimes becomes dysfunctional,” fiction, too, is “essentially and universally concerned with how the mind works and it follows therefore that there is a concern with how it *does not* work” (240, orig. emphasis). Crawford and Baker argue that the study of fiction enables mental health professionals to better understand the experiences of their patients: “It is [...] both valuable and effective to examine the human experiences, emotional responses and behaviours contained within fictions. [...] Through increasing the understandability of illness experience as explicated through fiction, the clinician can develop a deeper empathetic understanding of the breadth of human experience” (239).

There are several resources, including books, journals, websites, and databases, dedicated to the study of literature and the arts as useful resources for mental health professionals. For example, *Mental Health, Psychiatry and the Arts* is a teaching handbook written by and for psychiatric educators, outlining the potential uses of literature and the arts in the medical classroom. *Fiction's Madness*, by mental health researcher Liam Clarke, uses several masterpieces of English and American literature to humanize the practice of psychiatry and psychology. Likewise, *Mindreadings: Literature and Psychiatry*, edited by psychiatrist and theorist Femi Oyebode, outlines the ability of literature to foster the psychiatrist's understanding of his/her patients and their conditions. *Madness in Post-1945 British and American Literature*, an interdisciplinary study the contributors to which are scholars from both literary and mental health fields, explores fiction as a potential source for understanding and interpreting mental illness.

Further, New York University maintains the Literature, Arts and Medicine Database, a resource for teaching and researching in Medical Humanities, a field that utilizes art and literature in the training of medical professionals. The database has an extensive listing of literary works that present issues related to mental illness. The *Journal of Applied Arts and Health*, published by the University of Northampton, illustrates "the effectiveness of the interdisciplinary use of arts in health and arts for health," including mental health. The journal *Literature and Medicine*, published through Johns Hopkins University, explores "interdisciplinary connections between literary understanding and medical knowledge and practice." Finally, the Madness and Literature Network, funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council, is a group of scholars and professionals from several fields related to both

mental health and literature, whose aim it is to “develop an interdisciplinary, global dialogue about the issues raised around representations of madness in literature.” Their website, www.madnessandliterature.org, is “a database of fiction relating to madness and mental health.”

The interest of the various mental health fields in literature is clear, and the interdisciplinary character of the resources discussed above reflects the participation of literary scholars in connecting the fields of mental health and literature. In fact, Crawford and Baker specifically encourage the literary critic’s application of scientific insight: “literary studies can also borrow from psychiatry in terms of deepening the multitude of discursal interpretations available of the human mind” (240). It is not surprising, then, that literary critics have become increasingly interested in the theories and findings of the mental health fields in their own analyses of literature.

A search of the MLA International Bibliography database underscores the literary community’s interest in mental health: using the terms “literature” and “psychology,” 3,439 texts are identified; “literature” and “psychiatry” returns 185; “literature” and “mental health” identifies 53; and “literature” and “mental illness” gives 248. Yet, despite the substantial interest of both mental health and literary scholars in psychological analyses of literature in general, very little work has addressed issues of mental health in immigrant literature: a search of the MLA database using the terms “literature” and “immigrant” identifies 2881 texts, but “literature” and “immigrant” and “psychology” gives just two; “literature” and “immigrant” and “psychiatry” provides no results; and “literature” and “immigrant” and “mental health” identifies only one, as does “literature” and “immigrant” and “mental illness.”

Of course, the reach of the MLA database is not exhaustive, but the dearth of identified texts related to immigrant literature and mental health issues, as compared to those related to literature and mental health issues in general, does illustrate the relative lack of attention given to such issues in immigrant fiction. Further, none of the texts identified fully applies the extensive body of mental health research specific to immigration to the representations of mental illness in the fiction written by and about contemporary American immigrants.

This is not to say, however, that factors *related to* mental health, though their connection is not specifically discussed, have gone completely unnoticed in the criticism of immigrant literature. For example, issues of identity have received substantial attention (see Borinsky; Carter; Chen; Dhaliwal; Gómez -Vega; Gonzalez and Ignacio; Hoffman; Ludwig; Llorente; Mongia; Ray, S.; Stavans; Sullivan; Tate; Warhol; and several others), as have issues of trauma and other forms of psychic pain (see Carter; Caminero-Santangelo; Hron; Mannino; Odamtten; Ray, B.; Sheffer; Satterlee; and others). Critics have also noted that certain, more specific mental health issues, such as eating disorders, frequently appear in immigrant fiction (see Bruening; Cowart). But there has yet to be an extensive examination of the issue that identifies and discusses the genesis and symptomatology of specific illnesses that mental health researchers have found to be prevalent in immigrant populations. The current project aims to do just that, providing an in-depth analysis of representations of mental illness in American immigrant fiction by focusing on the individual characters' experiences during the relevant stages of migration and their subsequent development and experience of mental illness.

B. Immigration and Mental Illness

The framework outlined here is intended to aid in the examination of mental illness as represented in immigrant fiction; it does not attempt an exhaustive examination of the extensive body of research on immigrant mental health. As Furnham and Bochner note in their book-length review and analysis of the available research, “It would be almost impossible to document all the studies done on migration and mental health in North America” (88). The present explanation simply provides a summary of the conclusions of experts in the mental health disciplines who have reviewed the available research that examines the correlation between the process of migration and the development of mental illness, focusing primarily on the relevant factors at each of the three stages of migration: pre-, peri-, and post-migration.

Mainstream American culture tends to view immigration as an unequivocally happy event; the immigrant leaves his/her home in search of a better life, which he/she finds on the shores of America. What is frequently overlooked, however, is the mental and emotional stress that immigration involves. When a person or group of people migrates, their lives are significantly disrupted and the effort required for successful adjustment in the new environment is considerable. Psychological stress and emotional strain are inherent to the changes in work, social relationships, community networks, and lifestyle experienced by the immigrant (Tseng 695). The inherent change is “of such magnitude that it not only puts one’s identity on the line but puts it at risk.” Immigrants experience “a wholesale loss of [their] most meaningful and valued objects: people, things, places, language, culture, customs,

climate, sometimes profession or economic/social milieu” (Grinberg and Grinberg 26). Losing what is important to them, what defines them, what has been the foundation of their identities precipitates a crisis “which shakes the entire psychic structure,” rendering the immigrant more vulnerable to the development of mental illness (26). The crises precipitated by immigration cause “catastrophic change,” [...] which “may lead to real catastrophe,” a descent into mental illness out of which the immigrant cannot climb, or “just the opposite: successful, creative development and its deeper significance, the enrichment of ‘rebirth’” (3).

Several studies have identified higher rates of mental illness among immigrant populations (Bhugra 251). Since the 1880s, when the U.S. census first noted a higher incidence of mental illness among foreign-born immigrants than the native population, American researchers have increasingly explored the relationship between immigration and mental health (Furnham and Bochner 95). The first major study, published by Odegaard in 1932, reported a much higher rate of hospital admission for schizophrenia among Norwegian-born immigrants than among the native population in Minnesota. Malzberg’s studies in the 1950s corroborated the correlation between immigration and schizophrenia in other regions of the United States, and from the 1960s forward, additional epidemiological studies in the United States and other Western countries have produced similar results (as cited by Veling and Susser 65).

Over the past few decades, building on this long history of epidemiological studies focusing on psychoses, particularly schizophrenia, the disorder most likely to require hospital admission and thus the most robust source of data, researchers have begun to examine the causality of the correlation between immigration and psychotic disorders. In their 2011

analysis of etiological models, Veling and Susser conclude that “migration might represent one of the strongest environmental risk factors for schizophrenia identified to date” (65). In addition to the increased incidence of psychotic disorders, the incidence of other psychiatric disorders, such as “anxiety, depression, post-traumatic stress disorder, [and] substance abuse [...] have all been associated with multiple immigrant populations” (Perez-Foster 154).

Attempts have been made to dismiss the significance of the correlation between the increased incidence rates of mental illness and the experience of immigration. For example, some have hypothesized that the correlation is artificially inflated due to an already increased occurrence of disorders in the general population of the country of origin, the selective migration of individuals whose predisposition to mental illness endow them with characteristics that make migration more appealing, and the diagnostic bias of Western psychiatric definitions of illness resulting in the over-diagnosis of illness in members with non-Western cultural backgrounds. While these factors are valid to some extent, their effects have ultimately been found to be statistically insignificant and do not fully refute the correlation (Veling and Susser 65).

This does not mean, however, that the act of immigration itself is the only cause of mental illness in immigrant populations or that within all immigrant groups there is a higher incidence; some studies have shown that there are various populations whose incidence rates are no greater than, and sometimes even less than, that of the native population. The conflicting results obtained from these various epidemiological and case studies reveal that “the relationship between immigration and frequency of mental disorders [is] not necessarily a single correlation” (Tseng 696), prompting researchers to examine more closely the specific

aspects of the immigrant experience that make individuals more vulnerable to mental illness (697).

C. The Stages of Migration

Recognizing the multivalent etiology of mental illness in immigrant populations, current research has begun to elucidate the cumulative impact of multiple, specific stressors relating to the complex social and psychological aspects of migration by dividing the process into phases, a series of events that are influenced by a constellation of factors at both the social and individual levels (Perez-Foster 155; Bhugra 244). There are three general phases of migration: pre-migration refers to the immigrant's experiences in his/her homeland prior to departure; peri-migration encompasses the immigrant's experiences while in-transit from the homeland to the new land; and post-migration begins when the immigrant arrives in the new land (Loue 59; Perez-Foster 155; Bhugra 244). Each phase carries its own set of experiences and factors that could potentially increase the immigrant's vulnerability to mental illness.

1. Pre-migration

The pre-migration stage includes the individual's life experiences before and leading up to the decision to emigrate. According to Tseng, "the background of the migrant, coupled with his or her reason for moving to live in a foreign society," will affect his/her psychological response to migration (Tseng 700). At this stage, the presence and severity of biological vulnerability, such as a genetic predisposition to mental illness; psychological vulnerability, particularly resulting from trauma; and social vulnerability, such as experiences

leading to alienation and isolation, may significantly affect the individual's ability to withstand the stress inherent to the migration process (Bhugra 255). The individual's connectedness to his/her culture and the voluntary or involuntary nature of his/her migration may also play a role in his/her psychological response (Tseng 700-703; Bhugra 244- 247).

a. Biological Vulnerability

Genetic predisposition is the main biological vulnerability affecting the development of major psychiatric disorders in immigrants. Tseng, in the chapter, "Migration, Refuge, and Adjustment," from his extensive *Handbook of Cultural Psychiatry*, explains that "it is the general view of scholars that the etiology of psychoses is predominantly biologic factors," but suggests that "the process of migration, which is psychologically stressful, might be one of the precipitating factors" (697). In their review of multiple epidemiological and case studies of psychoses, particularly schizophrenia, among immigrant populations, Veling and Susser note that "genes may influence the sensitivity to an environmental exposure, or the environment may change the expression of genes that are in the pathway to psychotic disorder" (73; see also Staniloiu et al. 318). They also suggest that, due to the stress inherent in the migration process, "migration might represent one of the strongest environmental risk factors identified to date" for one already genetically predisposed to mental illness (65). In tracing the progression of the individual's descent into mental illness, the symptoms of which typically reach clinical levels post-migration, it is important to first identify whether he/she had any biological vulnerability to mental illness prior to his/her migration.

b. Psychological Vulnerability

Trauma is the most significant pre-migration factor increasing an individual's psychological vulnerability to mental illness. In their benchmark psychoanalytic examination of migration, Grinberg and Grinberg define trauma as "any violent shock and its consequences to the personality," explaining that "the notion of trauma should be applied not only to single, isolated events (for example, the sudden death of a family member, a sexual attack) but also to events which may be prolonged for greater or lesser periods, such as affective deprivation [or] separation from parents" (10; see also Loue 63-64, Bhugra 250; Perez-Foster 156). In many ways, cumulative trauma can be more difficult to identify pre-migration because the individual's response may be subtle, reflected in characteristics such as low self-esteem, weak self-concept, and feelings of isolation. As Grinberg and Grinberg explain, in "cumulative traumas, [...] the subject's reactions are not always expressed or visible, but the effects of such trauma run deep and last long" (12). Already traumatized individuals may become increasingly susceptible to mental illness as they encounter the extreme stress accompanying the migration process.

c. Social Vulnerability

It is also important to note the significant impact of pre-migration social experiences, particularly those creating feelings of alienation and isolation, on the individual's vulnerability to mental illness. According to Veling and Susser, "cognitive psychological models of the development of psychosis postulate that adverse social experiences may create an enduring cognitive vulnerability, which is characterized by negative schematic models of

the self and the world, for example, beliefs about the self as vulnerable to threat or about others as dangerous” (68). Negative social experiences at the pre-migration stage create a “vulnerability [that] has been associated with depression, and may lead to paranoid ideations and, in extreme forms, to persecutory delusions in those genetically at risk for psychosis. [...] Such factors are likely to contribute to the increased rates of psychotic disorders among immigrants” (68).

Wicks et al., in their report on the association between childhood adversity and the risk of developing major psychiatric disorders later in life, noted that these “social factors [...] all represent a situation of exclusion, [...] the adverse/excluding situations that influence the risk of developing schizophrenia and other psychoses” (as cited by Veling and Susser 69). When the individual experiences alienation or isolation in his/her home environment, he/she will be more sensitive to those feelings post-migration and may have difficulties becoming rooted in the new society. According to Grinberg and Grinberg, the individual needs to have a “feeling of belonging” in his/her pre-migration environment because “the possibility of developing a feeling of belonging [is] a requisite for becoming integrated into a new country and also for maintaining one’s sense of identity” (23). Those whose alienation or isolation pre-migration is “especially intense will find that their problems become exacerbated during migration because the migratory experience accentuates for a time the feeling of not belonging. One ceases to belong to the world one left behind and does not yet belong to the world in which one has newly arrived” (23). On a social level, if the individual is already an outsider, he/she is less likely to feel at home in the new society.

d. Cultural Connectedness

Cultural connectedness, which in some cases may contribute to the individual's social vulnerability, is another pre-migration factor that needs to be considered. According to Tseng, "the attitudes of immigrants regarding their own culture often has [sic] a significant impact on the results of migration" (703). When the immigrants have developed "a strong cultural identity, [...] a high degree of pride in their own culture, and are biased toward the cultures of others," they may resist the acculturation process, which, depending on the presence of other post-migration factors, may be problematic from a mental health perspective (703). At the other extreme, those who do not have a strong cultural identity or do not respect the values of their own cultures "tend to assimilate themselves into the host society readily when they migrate." But this, too, can be problematic, particularly if the individual is unable to adapt quickly enough or is not well-received by the host culture and becomes alienated and isolated (703). Ideally, the individual is able to retain certain aspects of his/her culture while also finding "a happy medium between their own culture and the new recipient culture" (Bhugra 247).

e. Voluntary/Involuntary Departure

According to Tseng, "the background of the migrant, coupled with his or her reason for moving to live in a foreign society, will determine the different processes and outcomes of migration" (700). In her analysis published in 2004 that examines the findings of 118 studies and reports from multiple disciplines related to immigrant mental health, Bhugra notes, "migrants may make personal choices for economic or aspirational reasons and also society

may force them to choose to migrate. [...]The differences between the forced and voluntary nature of migration must be remembered when trying to understand the impact of migration on the type of response in the individual,” as “those who are reluctant to migrate tend to have high levels of mental health problems” (244, 247). It is also important to recognize, as Grinberg and Grinberg point out, that “voluntary and involuntary [...] is a relative distinction, to be sure, since many emigrants who seem not to be forced to leave their homelands by external circumstances do so out of fear” (18).

According to Tseng, voluntary migration is “the most common form of migration observed in the past and present” and is typically motivated by a search for opportunity. In this type of migration, “the immigrant [chooses] to move from one society to another with the primary intention of seeking a better job and better economic conditions, aiming for an improved quality of life.” These individuals are “highly motivated to migrate, and tend to have better outcomes than those who are reluctant” to leave their homelands (700). In contrast, involuntary migrants, such as exiles and refugees, leave their homes fearing for their lives, either as members of a group or on an individual basis, and face a set of circumstances that frequently results in trauma (Tseng 711). In their book-length analysis of the psychological impact of migration, Furnham and Bochner define involuntary migrants as those “who flee their homelands to escape real or imagined persecution” (96); they leave “out of fear rather than from a rationally arrived at decision to settle elsewhere,” under circumstances that are “very stressful, if not traumatic” (97). Perez-Foster emphasizes the trauma associated with such a departure: “the most recent studies [...] have provided a devastating picture of [...] the chaos that individuals and families withstand when migration is

determined by threats to their livelihood and daily safety.” Combined with the stress already inherent to migration, “[these] factors can move people toward extreme levels of distress and decompensation” (157). Tseng also notes the potential trauma accompanying an involuntary departure: “in many cases, [involuntary migrants] have encountered killing, robbing, rape, death, and other serious situations that may lead to psychological trauma” (711).

In addition to the fear precipitating the departure and the trauma resulting therefrom, “the typically abrupt nature of involuntary migration forecloses any careful preparation,” so “the number of material assets that can be moved is limited and there is usually severe financial loss, resulting in limited resources after the migration” (Tseng 701). Perhaps even more devastating than the economic loss is the psychological loss experienced; in most cases, they have “little time to prepare for the separation from loved ones and familiar surroundings” (Furnham and Bochner 98). As Harlem notes, involuntary immigrants are typically denied “the protective rite of farewell” (462). For them, “the connection with the home society is completely disrupted, and the outcome of the migration, in terms of the duration of living in a foreign place, and the final solution regarding the move are uncertain” (Tseng 700).

For those whose departure is involuntary, the stress and trauma experienced leading up to their migration can increase their vulnerability to mental illness. They experience “a profound loss, not just in terms of status and material goods but also [...] the loss associated with being separated from members of their family and other social support networks. In combination, these influences [constitute] a stressful, if not traumatic experience” (Furnham and Bochner 98). Moving to a foreign country and “dealing with transcultural adjustment present another level of problems they have to face and with which they have to cope”

(Tseng 711). According to Perez-Foster, “both clinical and quantitative mental health literature show robust evidence that these experiences [...] are directly associated with psychological sequelae that will be experienced for years to come, as these immigrants make their adjustments to a new life and culture” (155).

2. Peri-migration

The next stage, peri-migration, encompasses the individual’s experiences during the actual journey from homeland to new land. According to Desjarlais et al., “flight from one’s homeland represents a major life event that, even if accomplished safely and swiftly, is likely to prompt major emotional and cognitive distress.” When the passage is marked by life-threatening danger and traumatic experiences, the individual’s vulnerability to mental illness is heightened to an even greater degree (142). At this stage, trauma is the greatest factor contributing to mental illness. The circumstances surrounding the passage can either extend pre-migration traumas or give rise to new traumas associated with or experienced during the passage itself. Perez-Foster notes that “studies of many groups over the past decade have linked trauma during the migratory process itself to clinical levels of psychological distress, with symptom severity being associated with the level of risk and anxiety involved in the escape experience” (156). For example, many immigrants from Mexico recount horrific experiences dealing with “coyotes” who force them into small compartments, sometimes for several days (155). Similarly, large groups of immigrants crossing oceans are often confined in overcrowded, unsanitary conditions aboard vessels of questionable seaworthiness for several months (Furnham and Bochner 98). Women are “particularly vulnerable to sexual

abuse while travelling” (Dejarlais et al. 142); many detail their imprisonment and repeated rapes as “payment” for their delivery over the border (Perez-Foster 155).

Due to these experiences, many immigrants may develop Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). Others, feeling lost, begin to grieve for their homelands, perhaps regretting their decision. Those travelling in a group that provides adequate social support are more able to cope, while those travelling alone or others who are more psychologically vulnerable may develop depression, anxiety, or other mental illnesses (Bhugra 245). For many, the legality of the journey may also be uncertain, and migrants who move to a new country illegally “are in a clearly unprotected no man’s land” and “tend to manifest serious psychiatric symptoms” (Tseng 711).

3. Post-migration

During the post-migration phase, the experience of the individual immigrant depends largely upon the environment he/she is faced with and his/her ability to adapt. The factors at this stage that may increase the immigrant’s vulnerability to mental illness are: a) language difficulties, b) culture shock, c) low socioeconomic status, d) discrepancy between aspirations and reality, e) the absence of adequate social support, and f) the absence of religious faith.

a. Language Proficiency

According to Tseng, “it is a general rule that fluency in the language of the host society will facilitate the process of cultural adjustment,” while “if there is a handicap in learning the new language, there will certainly be difficulties in acculturation” (699). Bhugra

notes that the level of proficiency in “the language of the recipient society” will “influence adjustment and distress” (245), and Furnham and Bochner cite case studies that use poor English language proficiency as a measure of social alienation (97). Perez-Foster notes that, “preoccupied with the obstacles of a new language they can barely speak” aggravates many immigrants’ experience “as the beleaguered ‘other,’” not only adding stress and further increasing their vulnerability but also preventing them from seeking help for their mental health problems (155).

b. Culture Shock

The concept of “culture shock” was first described by the anthropologist Oberg in 1960 as the shock

precipitated by the anxiety that results from losing all our familiar signs and symbols of social intercourse. These signs or cues include the thousand and one ways in which we orient ourselves to the situations of daily life: when to shake hands and what to say when we meet people, [...] how to make purchases, when to accept and when to refuse invitation, when to take statements seriously and when not. (as cited by Furnham and Bochner 48)

The concept of “culture shock” has been adopted by the mental health disciplines to describe the “primarily emotional reaction that follows from not being able to understand, control, and predict the behavior” of members of the host society (Furnham and Bochner 49). Culture shock is a response to a “lack of familiarity with both the physical setting (design of homes, shops, offices) as well as the social environment (etiquette, rituals) [...], and use of time” (49). The intensity of the culture shock experienced depends on the degree of difference between the home and new cultures (Bhugra 246). For example, a person from New York City would experience a lower level of culture shock upon emigrating to London, where the language,

culture, and physical environment are similar, than he/she would experience emigrating to an undeveloped area of India.

The intensity of culture shock and the accompanying alienation may be mitigated or exacerbated by the host society's reception of the immigrant. When the host society is welcoming, it may be easier for the immigrant to adjust, while an unwelcome reception is likely to increase anxiety and encourage isolation, prolonging the individual's experience of culture shock (Oguz 56; see also Furnham and Bochner 97). Migration from a rural to an urban environment may be particularly stressful, as "the recipient urban culture may be threatening, less welcoming, and frankly rejecting" (Bhugra 247).

Typically, the feeling of culture shock dissipates as the individual adjusts to his/her new environment. In situations where the cultural differences are extreme, it may be several years before the individual is able to adapt well enough to function in the new culture. The intensity and duration of the individual's experience of culture shock and the accompanying alienation may increase his/her vulnerability to mental illness (Bhugra 246).

c. Socioeconomic Status

Many immigrants struggle to find well-paying jobs commensurate with their educational and occupational backgrounds. According to Tseng, "educational level and occupational background will obviously influence post-migration adjustment." Tseng explains that "it is usually the midrange group, with ordinary occupational experience, that has an easier time finding a job in the new society and settling down in the new environment. The extremes, either highly educated with a special occupational background or poorly educated

with unskilled job experience, have a harder time in obtaining appropriate and satisfactory occupations” (699).

According to Desjarlais et al., “difficulties in gaining appropriate employment can provide an additional long-term stressor. Without employment, financial and personal pressures can be considerable. Those successful in gaining employment will typically experience substantial downward mobility, with consequential threats to self-esteem as well as standard of living” (145). Several additional studies identify “socioeconomic disadvantage as a risk factor” (Veling and Susser 69) for mental illness in immigrant populations, particularly in “decaying inner-city areas” (68). In studies of refugee populations, low socioeconomic status contributed to increased levels of alienation (Furnhman and Bochner 97), and studies conducted in several other immigrant populations found that “poor housing conditions” played a role in the development of depression and the increased risk of suicide (Loue 62). A study conducted by the Canadian government also identified “drop in socioeconomic status” as “increasing the risk of developing a mental disorder” (Oguz 56).

Perez-Foster concludes, “employment issues [and] inadequate living conditions [...] [are] key factors in [...] psychological distress” among immigrants, as “confronting isolation and exploitative living conditions leave immigrants at significant risk.” Ultimately, the struggle to work and survive post-migration “painfully compounds the distress experienced by many who have already suffered [...] in their homelands, followed by the myriad risks of difficult transit and relocation” (Perez-Foster 156).

d. Aspirations v. Reality

Closely linked to the drop in socioeconomic status experienced by so many immigrants is the discrepancy between their initial aspirations and the reality confronting them. Veling and Susser, in summarizing the findings of various sociological studies, suggest that immigrants, “having a disadvantaged position [...] may experience a particularly large gap between their goals and the opportunities to achieve them, and thus may be at higher risk for mental illness” and note that “this gap may be perceived even more by immigrants living in low-ethnic-density neighborhoods” (70). They conclude, “the long-term experience of social defeat, defined as a subordinate position or as ‘outsider status’, may be an explanation for the increased incidence of schizophrenia among immigrants.” They explain that, “conceptually, this relates to the frustration of the gap between aspirations and achievements, as defeat may be more frequent in immigrants whose notions concerning the ease of upward mobility are thwarted by the opportunities currently available in Western society” (71).

e. Social Support

Social support has been shown to be “critically important in preventing” mental illness among immigrant populations (Bhugra 246). Because “migration often involves the leaving behind of family, friends, and acquaintances,” there is “a consequent increase in [...] mental illness” (Furnham and Bochner 185). Furnham and Bochner cite a significant body of research finding that “social support is directly related to increased psychological well-being and to a lower probability of [...] mental illness,” while, conversely, “deficiencies in social support are related to the emergence of psychiatric symptoms” (185). Where immigrant

groups “have developed dense and liberally available support networks, the distress and breakdown of these groups is lessened,” so “what is clearly important for migrants [...] is that they have access to a supportive group” (185).

Both the availability and quality of social support are crucial. Dejarlais et al. refer to studies that found that migrating and living with family is a “protective factor” against the risk of psychological distress, as is belonging to a community. They conclude, “social linkages [...] tend to ameliorate the effects of psychological stressors,” and “social support, by enhancing a sense of identity and belongingness, protects against the stresses of sociocultural adjustment” (146). Veling and Susser also identify several studies demonstrating that belonging to a culturally cohesive group in the host society provides “a strong, positive ethnic identity [that] is related to psychological well-being among immigrants,” while “a weak and negative ethnic identity increases risk,” as does “an assimilated or marginalized identity” (71). Additional studies have shown that when “individuals [from the same culture] are dispersed across large geographical areas [in the new country], then any social support they may have dissipates as well,” making the individual members more vulnerable (Bhugra 246). Ultimately, “those who are alone in a new country and separated from family are more likely than those who are accompanied to suffer the psychological sequelae of premigration trauma. [...] Clearly, the sense of isolation and absence of familial support serves as yet another strike against the already stressed newcomer” (Perez-Foster 158).

While the research clearly supports the critical role social support plays in immigrant mental health, there are situations where living among members of one’s own culture can be detrimental. For example, when an individual experiences alienation from the mainstream

culture of his/her homeland pre-migration, he/she is likely to feel uncomfortable in an enclave of fellow immigrants from that society. In fact, in such a situation, the effects of pre-migration stress and/or trauma resulting from a social vulnerability can be exacerbated. Thus, “under certain circumstances, social support from the same group of individuals may be less welcome by the individual because of underlying stigma and attitudes” (Bhugra 246).

f. Religion

As mental illness may be experienced as a spiritual struggle as much as a psychological one, individuals possessing a religious background may use religion as a way to understand their suffering. In this way, according to Dejarlais et al., “religious affiliation can serve as a protective factor with regard to experienced stressors.” At the social level, individuals living in communities of immigrants who share his/her cultural and religious backgrounds may find “such affiliation [...] represents another source of social support,” which itself is an important factor lessening the individual’s vulnerability to mental illness. But, ultimately, the social support gained through religious affiliation is ancillary to religion’s “primary effect [which] may rather be concerned with the provision of a form of ideology with respect to which psychological coping mechanisms may be structured” (146). Thus, individuals may rely on the teachings of their religion as they attempt to comprehend both their descent into and experience of mental illness.

4. The Emergence of Mental Illness

Symptoms of mental illness can arise at any point during migration but may not reach clinical levels until the immigrant has lived in the new society for several years. According to Tseng, “several clinicians and scholars have focused on the time span involved in the development of certain mental disorders after migration” (697) and conclude that “there is no correlation of the development of mental disorders in terms of time” (698). Thus, there is no time limit for the development of mental illness precipitated by immigration; the individual may appear to be adjusted and functioning well for several years before his/her symptoms begin to interfere with his/her daily life, but when they do, the genesis of the disorder is most likely their experiences during the migration process (see Staniloiu et al. 194; Loue 68; Tseng 715).

As the immigrant passes through each stage of migration, he/she may face numerous experiences increasing his/her vulnerability to mental illness. At the pre-migration stage, the presence and severity of biological, psychological, and social vulnerability, coupled with the individual’s cultural connectedness and the voluntary or involuntary nature of his/her departure may make mental illness more probable. At the peri-migration stage, trauma is the most significant factor rendering the individual more vulnerable, and at the post-migration stage, the immigrant’s language proficiency, experience of culture shock, socioeconomic status, aspirations, social support, and religion will either mitigate or exacerbate the vulnerability he/she has accumulated along the way.

D. Conclusion

Deepening the already robust, interdisciplinary examination of mental illness in literature, the present analysis narrows the focus to mental illness in immigrant fiction. Many immigrant texts illustrate individual struggles with mental illness, but up to this point literary criticism has lacked a solid analytical framework grounded in research from the mental health disciplines with which to identify and explore the role of mental illness in immigrant literature. Applying the findings of mental health researchers, as they continue to elucidate the multivalent correlation between immigration and mental illness, reveals the complexity of the immigrant experience and its expression in immigrant fiction. The texts chosen for this analysis recount the experiences of their characters through the stages of the migration process and reveal the influence of the many factors on the immigrant's vulnerability to and ultimate experience of mental illness. The analyses contained in Chapter Two and Chapter Three, respectively, are organized in chronological order with sections for each stage of migration. Within each section, the relevant factors are identified and the experiences of each individual are discussed in turn. The final section of each chapter addresses the characters' ultimate development and experience of mental illness.

Chapter Two, "The Catastrophic Impact of Isolation: Wendy Law-Yone's *The Coffin Tree*," traces the experiences of the unnamed narrator and her brother, Shan, through the stages of migration from their childhoods in Burma to their exile in the United States, where they become increasingly vulnerable to mental illness until their thresholds are breached and they descend into madness. At the pre-migration stage, the factors relevant to both the narrator's and Shan's experiences are 1) psychological vulnerability, 2) social vulnerability,

3) weak cultural connectedness, and 4) involuntary departure. At this stage, Shan also faces biological vulnerability. Both siblings experience significant pre-migration traumas, intense alienation and isolation in both social and cultural contexts, and their expulsion from their home in Burma is extremely sudden and unexpected.

At the post-migration stage, the factors increasing their vulnerability to mental illness are 1) language proficiency, 2) culture shock, 3) socioeconomic status, 4) discrepancy between aspirations and reality, and 5) social support. While they have some knowledge of English when they arrive in the United States, the pair is unable to function on more than a superficial level. They struggle to acclimate themselves in the cold and threatening physical, cultural, and social environment of New York City. The extreme poverty they experience takes its toll, as Shan begins to show symptoms of schizophrenia. When they are finally able to find support in the Lanes' home, it is too late. Shan's paranoia prevents them from becoming connected to the family that took them in, and they soon leave, moving to Florida in search of the fortune Shan believes he will discover at the bottom of the ocean. When the pair finally parts ways, it appears that the narrator may make it after all, but Shan returns, suffering from acute symptoms of schizophrenia. As Shan slowly wastes away over the following two years, the narrator, too, begins to fall ill. Following his death, she falls deeper into depression, cycling downward until she suffers a psychotic break, attempts suicide, and is hospitalized.

Chapter Three, "Vulnerability, Mental Illness, and the Immigrant Child: The Experiences of Yolanda and Sandra in Julia Alvarez's *How the Garcia Girls Lost Their Accents*," examines the Garcia family's experiences from their pre-migration lives of

privilege to their post-migration experiences in New York. Focusing on Yolanda and Sandra, the two sisters who are ultimately hospitalized with severe mental illnesses post-migration, the relevant pre-migration factors are biological, psychological, and social vulnerability. Though it is not specifically stated in the text, the fact that both sisters develop psychosis, suggests that the sisters are genetically predisposed to mental illness. Both sisters are also traumatized as young children, and their isolation within the family compound and alienation from the broader culture are also significant experiences. Relevant post-migration factors are 1) language difficulties, 2) low socioeconomic status, 3) culture shock, and 4) the absence of adequate social support. The ages of the girls when they migrate make their difficulties with language and culture shock particularly pointed, and they are alienated from the majority of their peers in the schools they attend. The family's drop in socioeconomic status is also difficult, and the only social support they receive is from Mami's parents. The girls experience intense alienation and isolation as they attempt to find themselves in the new and frightening society they are dropped into.

The final chapter reiterates the genesis and importance of this project and discusses further applications of the framework developed here.

II. THE CATASTROPHIC IMPACT OF ISOLATION: WENDY LAW-YONE'S *THE COFFIN TREE*

Exiled from the past, I faced a future without welcome and knew no aspirations beyond the sheer effort it took to propel me through the weight of each heavy day. (Law-Yone 149)

A. Background: Not Your Typical Immigrant Narrative

Wendy Law-Yone's *The Coffin Tree* provides one of the most striking examples of mental illness in immigrant fiction. The novel traces the experiences of the unnamed female narrator and her brother from their tumultuous childhoods in Burma through their abrupt exile to the United States, their problematic adjustment, his descent into schizophrenia and subsequent death, and her own struggle with mental illness that culminates in a suicide attempt and hospitalization. At each stage of migration, the siblings become increasingly vulnerable to mental illness; after two years in America, their descent seems inevitable.

Though published in 1983, *The Coffin Tree* has received scant critical attention because the novel does not lend itself to easy categorization; it defies labels. As Law-Yone explains in an interview, "being difficult to place [...] is something I value. [...] I would be very disturbed if suddenly I was pegged. For me it's more interesting not to be easily categorized or located" (Bow 196). At the most basic level, *The Coffin Tree* is an example of immigrant literature; the author is a Burmese-American immigrant, the characters are Burmese-American immigrants, and the experiences described take place in the context of

immigration. What becomes problematic for critics, however, is that the novel steps outside of the standard immigrant narrative. The text is not the expected treatment of the immigrant experience as the pathway from hardship to success; instead, *The Coffin Tree* focuses on “the underside of immigration and acculturation” (Bow 183). It exposes an aspect frequently glossed over in immigrant fiction, the mental and emotional impact, which, depending on the experiences of the immigrant before, during, and after migration, may be catastrophic.

The impressions of early reviewers illustrate the discomfort garnered by Law-Yone’s atypical representation of the immigrant experience. Charles Larson characterizes the novel as “exotic,” presumably due to the Asian origin of the author and characters. He then appears confused by the “horror of the tale” to which “there is hardly even a story or plot in the usual sense” (283). His confusion stems from the fact that *The Coffin Tree* lacks a clear linear plot that describes the process of immigration as a difficult but ultimately happy event, and his reaction reveals how deeply Law-Yone transgresses mainstream cultural expectations of immigrant narratives. The standard rags-to-riches American Dream is not presented. The notion of the cultural environment of America as largely benevolent and even restorative for the immigrant’s weary soul is also absent. The result is a somewhat baffled reception: “There are few examples of culture shock as disturbing as *The Coffin Tree*. We are accustomed to reading accounts of Americans and Europeans going crazy in exotic climes; rarely have writers from these areas related the converse scenario” (383). Larson sees in *The Coffin Tree* a story that reverses the established Western narrative of American émigrés “going crazy in exotic climes,” a logical course of events when viewed from the perspective that Western culture is inherently more hospitable than other, more “exotic” ones. For Law-Yone’s

Burmese characters, however, America is the “exotic clime,” and, in that hostile environment, they are “going crazy.” Thus, rather than providing the desired representation of the immigrant experience as a steady rise from initial hardship to ultimate success, *The Coffin Tree* provides a much darker narrative. It subverts popular expectations by focusing not on the rise but the descent of the immigrant into insanity, triggered in large part by immigration. As Law-Yone notes in an interview, “[t]he culture of success, the myth of success, is entirely too oppressive in America. All you hear about is happy endings, inspirational stories, the human potential discourse” (Bow 188). It comes as no surprise, then, that in revising the established immigrant narrative to include a deep examination of mental illness, *The Coffin Tree* has received relatively little critical attention.

This is not to say that the presence of mental illness in the novel has been flatly ignored. In her review for *The New York Times*, Edith Milton, like Larson, characterizes the work as “exotic and savage,” describing the “Burmese world” as “hostile” and emphasizing the clash between the characters’ “Oriental custom” and American culture as instrumental in their demise. She approaches the novel through the same culturally biased lens as Larson, but where Larson is unsure how to address the element of madness in the novel, Milton speaks to it directly, ultimately concluding that “[t]his is, in fact, a novel about madness.” For her, the novel “describes a universe where madness goes beyond the personal, beyond the political and historical. It is cosmic.” Milton recognizes that Law-Yone’s text reaches beyond the typical representation of the immigrant experience, defining and exploring “the boundaries of sanity”; however, her characterization of mental illness in the novel as an examination of madness in the universal sense, rather than in the specific context of immigration, denies the

significance of that context. While it is true that madness, like all human conditions, extends beyond the individual to the world at large, *The Coffin Tree* is concerned less with the universality of madness and more with the role immigration from Burma to the United States plays in its development.

As Tamara Ho suggests in her chapter on *The Coffin Tree* in *A Resource Guide to Asian American Literature*, issues of “madness and reason” are fertile ground for analysis, and, responding specifically to Milton’s characterization of the novel’s madness as “cosmic,” she contends that “the narrative seems to suggest a careful examination of the political and historical conditions that contribute toward certain populations’ ‘dis-ease’ with rationality and reason” (114). Ho also acknowledges that “[m]adness and abandonment of reason [in *The Coffin Tree*] can be examined from a number of perspectives, ranging from a personal sense of loss and alienation to larger cultural and historical situations of chaos, trauma, marginality, and exile” (113). Law-Yone, herself, characterizes her work as attempting “psychological scrutiny and insight” (Yoo 300). Yet the issue continues to receive very little attention, despite Milton’s early review of the novel, Ho’s chapter written eight years later, and the interview with Law-Yone published in 2000, which together initiate a discussion that could lead to insightful analysis of mental illness in *The Coffin Tree*, specifically, and in the immigrant narrative more generally.

Perhaps lack of theorization has kept critics from tackling the issues of mental illness in *The Coffin Tree*. Without the research currently developing regarding immigrant psychology, critics have not been afforded a sufficient lens through which to identify and effectively examine the elements of mental illness in the text. Instead the discussion has been

framed in the manner in which most discussions of immigrant literature are framed, looking at the novel as an example of ethnic or Asian American literature through its illustrations of culture, cultural difference, acculturation, and the like. But Law-Yone's text is not a typical immigrant narrative. It is a study of mental illness, or more specifically, the point at which mental illness and immigration converge. As such, the failure to analyze the elements of mental illness as mental illness, rather than as problematic cultural experiences, forecloses a fuller understanding of the text.

The few critics who address the elements of mental illness represented in *The Coffin Tree* trace the characters' madness to their post-migration experiences of culture shock or their inability to acculturate in an environment so drastically different from their homeland. For example, Elaine Kim's article, "Defining Asian American Realities Through Literature," which discusses *The Coffin Tree* in a single paragraph, contends that the narrator "almost loses her mind" due to the "contrast between her life in Burma and America." According to Kim, "Unless [the narrator] can adapt herself to a hostile and terrifying new world, with its bitter loneliness, its telephone answering machines, and its asylums for the insane, unless she can survive the transplant and set down roots in American soil, she will disappear from the face of the earth" (96). Hyperbole aside, Kim overlooks the narrator's nearly successful acculturation. Despite her early experiences of culture shock, she actually experiences some measure of success within just two years of immigrating: "I was beginning to feel some mastery of life in America, [...] I had learned to drive a car and file a tax return, [...] I had found steady work and made acquaintances, [...] I could look around me and consider all the possibilities the new world had to offer" (Law-Yone 70). In other words, the narrator has

overcome her initial culture shock and begun to adapt to American culture, even considering herself to be functioning well until her brother succumbs to schizophrenia: “it was at this point, two years after our arrival in the States, that I was taken captive for the next two long years in which my brother fell apart” (70). It is the experience of helplessly watching her brother slowly lose his mind that pushes her over the edge, marking the beginning of her own decline. More complicated than simple culture shock, her illness results from the culmination of her experiences through each stage of migration. The clash between Burmese and American cultures is but one post-migration factor that contributes; there are several others, pre- and post-migration, and it is the compounding of these several discrete factors that pushes her to her breaking point. To view *The Coffin Tree* from the limited perspective of cultural difference is to miss the depth and complexity of the characters’ experiences.

Similarly, Rachel Lee’s article, “The Erasure of Places and the Re-Siting of Empire in Wendy Law-Yone’s *The Coffin Tree*,” examines the novel through the lens of “Asian American Studies” (149). Lee critiques the theoretical “will to placelessness,” which creates “dislocated meanings” and ultimately “mimics an ideology of imperialism” (150). She reads the novel primarily for its “geopolitical nuances,” probing its “narrative of political torture” and “the role of Western institutions [...] in producing cultural difference as a sign of mental instability.” Lee views the characters’ mental illnesses as metaphorical representations of dislocation and displacement; madness results from the characters’ possession of “multiple, and often conflicting, perspectives on space.” To recover, the characters must exchange these multiple perspectives for “a singular, rational, topographic, and controlled perspective coded as ‘sanity’” (172). Ultimately, Lee’s argument, like Kim’s, traces the characters’ mental

illnesses to their inability to adjust to their new environment, to move from the multiple, conflicting perspectives experienced during the period of culture shock to the acculturated adoption of the “controlled perspective” of the West.

Unlike Kim, Lee does recognize the contextual importance of culture and immigration in examining madness in the novel, specifically criticizing Milton’s characterization of the novel as one about a universal madness rather than “an Asian American novel or a portrait of Burmese immigration to the United States” (150). Yet in her own analysis, Lee notes the context but discounts the importance of mental illness as a major focus of the text. While Lee’s analysis includes a fuller discussion of the novel’s madness than Kim’s, it makes the presence of mental illness in the text merely a vehicle for a general statement about political and cultural displacement. Her purpose is essentially the same – to provide a reading of the novel from the perspective of cultural difference. Her examination of mental illness is simply a means to that end.

The most direct examination of mental illness in *The Coffin Tree* comes in David Cowart’s seminal work, *Trailing Clouds: Immigrant Fiction in Contemporary America*. In a chapter titled “Immigration as *Bardo*: Wendy Law-Yone’s *The Coffin Tree*,” Cowart characterizes the madness of both the narrator and her brother, Shan, as the product of nostalgia, contending that, for the immigrant, “uncurbed nostalgia precludes the mental adjustments that promote recovery of something like a normal life”; in other words, “nostalgia undermines acculturation” (177). When held captive by nostalgia, the immigrant is unable to “engage with the actuality of either the present or the past. In its extreme form, this failure verges into madness” (181). According to Cowart, “Law-Yone suggests that every immigrant

must experience a kind of lunacy, a taking leave of reason. She or he must spend a season in quarantine, as it were, as ‘patient’ in a sometimes literal asylum. [...] Immigrants emerge from their quarantine [...] only when they come to terms with their situation, only when they recognize and repudiate the insidious workings of nostalgia” (181). Thus, “the exile’s recovery of mental equilibrium depends on either letting go of the past or allowing it to occupy a carefully circumscribed emotional space” (181). Cowart makes a good point, culling several examples of nostalgic references from the text, particularly Shan’s escalating obsession with and glorification of his life in Burma as he descends deeper into insanity. According to Cowart, while Shan is destroyed by his inability to let go of the past, the narrator survives because “[i]n reaction to her brother’s condition, [she] learns to despise sentimentality, to ‘avoid it at all costs, to fix on reality a hard, unblinking eye’” (181, citing Law-Yone 78). At the point in the novel when the narrator “learns to despise sentimentality,” however, she is far from “surviving”; this tactic does not enable her survival but is one of the many strategies she employs in her unsuccessful attempt to stave off her own descent into mental illness, which culminates in her suicide attempt. For the narrator, rejecting nostalgia, alone, does not predict her success.

Nonetheless, as Cowart points out, nostalgia can be significant in immigrants’ development of mental illness. Mental health researchers have, in fact, found that as immigrants face the challenges inherent to adjustment in a new environment, they may naturally experience a period of nostalgia, during which the homeland is held as superior to the new land and the immigrant may long to return “home” (Harlem 466). The most current understanding is that as the process of acculturation continues, such intense nostalgia usually

dissipates, and the immigrant is able to reminisce in a more emotionally healthy way, from the “carefully circumscribed emotional space” Cowart describes (188). In the end, nostalgia hinders acculturation to the extent that the immigrant is unable to move beyond it (Grinberg and Grinberg 8-9), as Cowart suggests. Cowart’s analysis, however, differs very little from the work of other critics who focus on cultural difference: nostalgia hinders acculturation and acculturation is the process of reconciling two cultures. But again, the characters’ sanity does not hinge solely on cultural difference; there are several additional factors pre- and post-migration to consider in analyzing the representations of mental illness in the novel.

While most critics have focused solely on post-migration cultural issues, Janie Har in “Food, Sexuality, and the Pursuit of a Little Attention” identifies some of the pre-migration sources of the narrator’s mental illness. Har specifically examines food and sexuality in *The Coffin Tree*. According to Har, the narrator uses food as a substitute for familial affection, a tactic she learns from her aunts and father and later employs when caring for her brother before his death. As Har notes, “[t]he provision of food is an easy cop-out for the more rigorous demands of being an aunt to a niece or being a father to a daughter” or, as is in the narrator’s case, being a sister to a brother (85). But while the narrator uses food as a way to emotionally distance herself, she uses her sexuality in her attempts to connect. Har traces the narrator’s “confusion between human communication and sexual feelings” to her relationship with her father, pointing specifically to the incident when he throws a box of buttons against the wall (89). As the narrator is crawling around picking them up, she realizes that she is in a sexually suggestive position on all-fours at her father’s feet and that her father’s attention is focused squarely on her. As Har explains, “[i]gnored by her own father most of the time, she

realizes that she can get his attention in a sexually charged situation. [...] [H]is sexual attention becomes a sure way of keeping him interested” (89). Har sees this theme recurring in the narrator’s relationships with both Commander Morgan and Dr. Friday; she is not interested in either of these men sexually, but because of the behaviors established in her relationship with her father, she “has a difficult time separating companionship from sexuality” and so she approaches these men from a sexual posture (90).

Har’s discussion of the narrator’s sexuality is particularly useful in a deeper analysis of mental illness in the novel. She examines how the narrator describes sex throughout her story as a brutal, savage act, forced instinctively by one person upon another without emotional connection or intimacy. In other words, sex is an assertion of power, a power that the narrator fears but, paradoxically, willingly submits to because it is the only means through which her existence is validated by another human being. In Har’s reading, the narrator presents herself through her sexuality in her attempts to be seen by and communicate with men. Har’s observation that the scene with the buttons is “sexually charged” and presents a situation in which the narrator’s father’s “sexual attention” is on the narrator, together with the narrator’s descriptions of sexual violence and her complete silence regarding her own sexuality, also reveals, as discussed in greater detail below, that in addition to the emotional abuse she reveals in her narrative, the narrator has also been sexually abused by her father. Har’s analysis, then, inadvertently unearths a significant trauma the narrator suffers pre-migration and the unhealthy patterns of behavior she develops as a means to cope.

By presenting the devastating effects of the psychological stress inherent to the process, *The Coffin Tree* reveals the darker side of immigration. It truly is, as Milton notes, “a

novel about madness,” a madness that is born through the immigrant experience. Yet existing criticism focuses primarily on cultural issues, and, with the exception of Har’s piece, the few analyses that take mental health issues into consideration do so solely in the context of cultural difference experienced post-migration. While post-migration culture shock is certainly relevant, cultural criticism alone does not adequately address the issues of mental illness in the novel. There are several other factors at each stage of migration, which, taken together, influence the characters’ vulnerability to and subsequent development of mental illness.

B. The Stages of Migration: From Burma to New York

To provide a deeper understanding of Law-Yone’s text, the following analysis employs the framework outlined in Chapter One, which elucidates the cumulative impact of multiple stressors relating to the complex social and psychological aspects of migration by dividing the process into stages: pre-migration, peri-migration, and post-migration. Because each stage carries its own set of factors and experiences increasing the immigrant’s vulnerability to mental illness, the migration of the two characters is addressed in chronological order from pre- to post-migration (the text contains no peri-migration experiences). The individual characters are discussed in turn when the factors present and experiences relevant to each are unique. When their experiences are similar or more intertwined, they are discussed together.

1. Pre-migration: A Decaying Foundation

The pre-migration stage includes the narrator's and Shan's life experiences before and leading up to their departure from Rangoon. At this stage, the presence and severity of biological, psychological, and social vulnerabilities, in addition to the siblings' weak cultural connections and the involuntary nature of their departure, decrease their ability to withstand the stress inherent to the migration process.

The Narrator: Alienated and Abused

a. Psychological Vulnerability

The narrator's traumatization pre-migration creates significant psychological vulnerability. She is raised in Rangoon in her family's compound, a toxic environment where she is emotionally abused and neglected by her grandmother ("the old tyrant") and other members of the household (Law-Yone 6). The narrator's mother died giving birth to her, a crime for which her grandmother punishes her every day. Because the narrator's life violently supplants her mother's – the grandmother's only daughter, her beautiful, perfect child – her grandmother vilifies her, molding the narrator into an image so different from her own daughter's that a comparison cannot even be made:

“Beautiful? Ha! Never could *you* imagine such beauty. Skin clear as tea. Hair like [...] silk rope [...]. My daughter, my only daughter!” (weeping now) “to die so young...to beget this...this...” (glaring at me, chuckling through her tears). “Look at you, just look at you,” she says, laughing, crying. Then, overcome, she stands with her legs apart and drizzles a stream of urine onto the floor [...]. “Why are you looking at me?” Shrieking, she pins me to the wall with her glare. “I’m not looking, Grandmother.” But I’m unable to take my

eyes off her, until she breaks the spell with a blinding, deafening cry of rage. "Out of my sight! Out! Out! The devil's in your eyes!" (8-9)

Even in death, the grandmother punishes the narrator: the "still shadow" of her ghost suddenly appears in the narrator's room, repeating the curse that the narrator has heard and felt since birth: "Now. Tell: Happy you killed your mother? Happy she died giving birth to you? Happy now, little mother killer?" (6). The curse, "mother killer," is the indelible mark her grandmother has bestowed upon her, the ghost inextricably intertwined with her own identity. She will never be exonerated for her mother's death; she will never escape the guilt and shame that define her.

The grandmother's treatment of her is clearly abusive, and the effects are further exacerbated by the other members of the family, who, in their fearful loyalty to the matriarch, follow her lead in shunning and ridiculing the narrator. At one point, even the cook's wife engages in her abuse, comparing the narrator to a picture of an Easter Island head: "Look, child, look! When did they take this picture of you?" (143). While the narrator always joins in the laughter at her own expense, the effect of these comments and the family's treatment of her runs deep: "back in my room I locked the door and leaned into the mirror, pressing my forehead against the cool glass. Nose to nose with myself, the familiar self-loathing began" (13).

Her inadequacy is utterly inescapable. She is surrounded by images of her mother displayed in every room, images she comes to idolize: "Portraits and heavily touched-up photographs of my mother hung throughout the house. They showed a young woman of arresting delicacy: long-limbed, long-fingered, slight as a dancer. Her hair, black and thick,

was peaked at the brow and framed her face like a low, neat cap. Her wide, moist eyes had the look of a startled doe” (14). The haunting images of her mother, the relentless insults of her grandmother and the others, and the neglect she suffers deeply undermine the narrator’s ability to develop a positive self-image. She internalizes the message that everything about her mother was perfect and good, while everything about her is its antithesis: “All that perfection had been squandered to produce my lusterless hair; my square-tipped fingers with the unsightly, bitten-off nails; my dark skin, broad face, and the half-moon shadows under my eyes that branded me with an old woman’s look” (14). And so she accepts the abuse as deserved: “What right had I, then, to take offense at the reminders of my plainness?” (14).

Worn down by the treatment she receives from her grandmother and the other adults who raise her, the narrator is completely vulnerable to further mistreatment, rendering her helpless in the face of her father’s sexual abuse. As Alpert et al. note, “Sexual abuse does not occur in a vacuum. Other equally potent, competing, or coexisting risk factors may [...] contribute to the symptoms and syndromes implicated in sexual abuse,” as such abuse frequently “co-occurs with other family abuse or problems” (956). The toxic environment and abuse she faces on a daily basis both exacerbate and enable the sexual abuse; together, they have a synergistic effect, severely traumatizing the narrator.

While she never explicitly describes her father abusing her, the symptoms and psychological effects of sexual abuse that the narrator exhibits, coupled with her intense fear of her father, suggest that he has, in fact, victimized her. According to Alpert et al., in the absence of explicit memory of the abuse, the existence of certain symptoms can, nonetheless, indicate that an individual has been sexually abused. The likelihood that sexual abuse has

occurred increases with the number, duration, and severity of the symptoms. When present, these symptoms “tend to be relatively severe and long-lasting,” and, “depending on the effects of other stressors experienced, either surrounding the abuse or encountered in other contexts, may eventually result in the diagnosis of any number of mental illnesses” (957). In the clinical literature,

the symptom pictures that emerge most strongly and consistently [in victims of sexual abuse] include those associated with emotional and relational distress; autonomic hyperarousal (somatic symptoms, chronic anxiety); reenactment of early behavior, often trauma-related and involving non-cognitive memories (e.g., sexual avoidance); attempts at management of hyperarousal or numbing/derealization (depression, emotional numbness or flatness, relational avoidance, sexual dysfunction, psychogenic amnesia, compulsions); and dissociation (detachment, distortions of memory and cognition, flashbacks or nightmares). (959)

In addition, most victims’ “self-perceptions are predominantly negative and include low self-esteem and self-worth, guilt, shame, and self-blame,” and they may also experience an “extreme aversion to sex and sexuality[...] and related guilt and shame” (958). Many victims also have “a tendency to feel isolated and alienated from others, a desire for anonymity, and difficulty in forming healthy adult attachments” (959).

The narrator displays several of the symptoms of sexual abuse pre-migration, and by the time she is admitted to the hospital following her suicide attempt post-migration, she has them all. She has internalized the blame for her mother’s death, feeling guilt and shame, and she extends that self-blame to her abuse and neglect by the other members of the household, including her father. She also has an “extreme aversion” to and “avoidance of” sex and sexuality, a response “involving non-cognitive memories” (Alpert et al. 959). When she is eighteen, she begins binding her breasts: “I shrank from my own womanhood, binding my

breasts with rolls of elastic bandage as cruelly and senselessly as the Chinese used to bind their baby girls' feet" (Law-Yone 31). And she never shares any information about her own sexual experience, pre- or post-migration, revealing that she has either avoided sexual experience altogether or is too ashamed to talk about it. She does, however, describe two pre-migration episodes related to sexuality: one is the scene when Mother Immaculata humiliates her in front of the class for writing love letters to an imaginary suitor, a situation that reinforces the guilt and shame she already experiences surrounding the relationship with her father (93-94). The other is the story she imagines of her father raping his "first wife," discussed in greater detail below. Post-migration, she is completely asexual, not once expressing a sexual interest in another person or her own sexuality until she is recovering from her suicide attempt in a therapeutic setting.

The narrator also feels "isolated and alienated" (Alpert et al. 959) as a child and even more intensely as an adult post-migration, when she fails to form any relationships with anyone other than Shan. Particularly striking is her "desire for anonymity" (959); she is writing her story, narrating her own experience, yet she remains forever unnamed. Both pre- and post-migration, she experiences "somatic symptoms" (959): Pre-migration, when the stress of the coup heightens her symptoms, she sleeps all day and becomes obsessed with her bodily concerns and physical environment, both of which are also "compulsions" (959). This pattern of symptoms is repeated and intensified post-migration when she again experiences somatic symptoms, "bodily aches and pains" and limbs that have "grown heavy" (Law-Yone 156), and she compulsively cleans her apartment to distance herself from her emotions. Throughout the novel, the narrator exhibits "emotional numbness and flatness" (Alpert et al.

959), never sharing an experience when she outwardly expresses emotion at the time of the events and only suggesting the presence of inner turmoil as she writes her story in retrospect.

Her childhood is also marked by “chronic anxiety” (959), a pervasive fear, both of her grandmother and, perhaps even more intensely, of her father, who has abandoned his family to lead the revolution of the hilltribes in the distant mountainous region of the country. When he returns to the compound, “without warning and at irregular hours,” it sends the entire household into a state of panic. The narrator describes him as “a natural bully” whose “small hooded eyes [...] flashed every kind of threat” (Law-Yone 49), a man “so good at impersonating God that he seemed almost incapable of getting hurt or bleeding” (141). Yet she longs for his approval: “Dwarfed by his shadow and aware of my own insignificance, I was more servile than the servants. I hastened to obey his orders, to give to his questions only those answers I thought he wished to hear” (141). As she tries desperately to please him, his indifference toward her, his “remoteness,” is unbearable. She reads his distance as a “grudge” for killing her mother: “My very survival was an affront. And, having survived, I was without any of the child’s hold on a parent: for what could he have seen of himself—or of Mother—in me?” (142). In this context, she sees his treatment of her as deserved, justified by the transgression of her existence and her inability to fill the shoes of her mother, the appropriate object of his sexual urges.

At one point, she creates an association between her own experience with her father as she enters puberty and a scene she imagines of her father raping a girl not much older than she: “when I had reached that point in adolescent consciousness of imagining my father’s sexuality, the image of this hilltribe girl sprang to mind.” This girl is her father’s “first wife,”

Shan's mother, a girl of no more than "fifteen or sixteen at most," who lives in one of the rebel villages. She imagines "not so much details of seduction and consummation, but the clearer, starker imagery of my father's impatience. I imagined him frantic to tear off the girl's coarse, cumbersome tunic, her long sash of melon seeds that would round the slope of her hips" (19).

She immediately follows the image of her father forcing himself on a young girl with her own experience: "I knew only too well how he behaved in heat" (19). She continues with an experience from when she is "about eleven or twelve," not much younger than the hilltribe girl. She is alone in a room with him when he reaches for a box of cigarettes to find that a servant has filled it with buttons. He throws it against the wall, sending buttons flying all over the floor. The narrator is "on my knees in an instant, cowed into servitude by fear and shame. I scurried around the floor, scooping up buttons by the handful. As I hastened to remove all traces of his tantrum before anyone else walked in, I could see out of the sides of my eyes my father the general's heavy khaki boots, thick-soled, mud-streaked, and standing uncannily still." The narrator's fear is palpable: "I picked up as many buttons as I could without going too close to his feet. My eyes never ventured above the level of his knees. Pretending to be absorbed in my task, I moved away from him, closer and closer to the door, and backed out of the room, still crawling" (19-20).

The very next line continues the story of the hilltribe girl: "Father's young woman was pregnant before long" (20). Her own memory of her father's violence is associated with the thought of her father forcibly consummating the marriage to his teenaged bride. She is drawing a parallel between the hilltribe girl and herself; the story about the buttons becomes a

reenactment of her own abuse. According to Herman, “Children often feel compelled to recreate that moment of terror, either in literal or disguised form, [...] with a fantasy changing the context or outcome of the dangerous moment” (38). Through the story of the buttons and the fantasy of her father raping the hilltribe girl, the narrator reenacts her experience. She begins her memory with the sympathetic statement, “I knew all too well how he behaved in heat,” and while she initially qualifies that statement with “albeit of a different element,” her qualification reflects her desire to distance herself from the abuse by placing someone else in the role of victim, as explained below. Nonetheless, “in heat” is a sexually charged expression referring to an instinctual, animalistic drive to mate.

As the abuse begins, the narrator is on her knees, “[c]owed into servitude”; she is on her knees to serve him, to please him. She describes her “fear and shame.” Fear, the dominant emotion of a victim, is the pervasive tone of the scene. “Shame” is also an interesting word here; there is no reason for her to feel shame for the mistake of a maid. “Shame” would, however, be an expected response to sexual abuse; victims feel ashamed because they believe that they are responsible for the abuse that they have somehow asked for or triggered. The buttons she is “scooping up [...] by the handful” could be the buttons on his pants as he is forcing her to perform oral sex or engage in some other act. The buttons may also have been torn from her own clothing, like the hilltribe girl’s sash of melon seeds, and she is scrambling to pick them up as she tries to clean up “all traces of his tantrum” as quickly as possible, “before anyone else walked in.” She cleans up any evidence of the abuse on herself or the floor, and, afraid of the secret being discovered, which could further provoke her father’s

violence or her grandmother's ridicule, she leaves the room on her knees as quietly as possible, wanting to disappear, ashamed.

The most significant aspect of this scene is her focus on her father's "uncannily still" boots, which she describes in detail. "Uncanny" is a powerful notion in the context of her reenactment. In the Freudian sense, something uncanny is at once familiar and foreign, real and unreal, which disorients the viewer, creating uncertainty and anxiety. As Herman explains, "there is something uncanny about reenactments" because traumatic memories are not encoded the way other memories are; they carry a different sense of reality: "Traumatic memories lack verbal narrative or context; rather they are encoded in the form of vivid sensations and images [...]. Often one particular image crystallizes the experience. The intense focus on fragmentary sensation, on image without context, gives the traumatic memory a heightened reality" (38). Because the image of her father's boots is something both real, in the context of innocuous memories of her father, and unreal or supernatural in the "heightened reality" of her traumatic memory, the boots appear "uncanny." The image of her father's boots crystallizes the experience, as it continues to haunt the narrator and floats to the surface again post-migration when she is in the hospital following her suicide attempt.

It is not unusual for victims of sexual abuse to have no or only fragmentary memories of the abuse itself but to still experience the psychological effects of that abuse. As illustrated in the narrator's story of the buttons, many victims have intense emotions related to the abuse, which are encapsulated in a specific image, like her father's boots, or which are relived through "flashbacks" or nightmares that may replay the event itself or create a scene that triggers the "associated intense affect" of the "dissociated traumatic material" (Alpert et al.

966). This type of “flashback or reenactment phenomenon can be conceptualized as a demonstration of implicit memory of an event in the absence of specific recall” (966). The narrator demonstrates implicit memory of the abuse through her association of the buttons scene with the story of the hilltribe girl and the detailed image of her father’s boots.

The recurring nightmares that afflict the narrator as a child also reveal her implicit memory. The terrifying imagery, a symbolic reference to the abuse, invokes the terror and intensity of the trauma, the “associated intense affect” Alpert describes, as well as her constant fear of the event happening again. The dream begins peacefully as the narrator watches her mother groom herself in the mirror, getting ready to go out for the evening. The image of her mother is drawn from the narrator’s favorite portrait of her, where she appears “capable of magic and compassion, a mother who, if I stared long enough and begged hard enough, might be moved to work a miracle” (Law-Yone 143). When she reaches the final step, dabbing perfume behind her ears and between her breasts, the narrator panics: “‘Don’t go,’ I begged, rushing at her, at once miserable and ashamed of my misery. ‘Please don’t go.’ I clung to her with my thin dark arms like some scrawny simian” (24). She is “ashamed” of her misery because, like her father’s abuse, she believes her mother’s leaving and the misery she suffers as a result are her fault. She becomes a tiny monkey, alone in the jungle, utterly vulnerable to the beast lurking in the dark.

The “centaur” of her nightmares appears. A symbol of her father, his animalistic sexuality, his violence, it watches her “with unwholesome interest from the corners of its wide, erotic eyes, nostrils flaring, tossing its male head, horse-style, to taunt and tease me, while the hoofed legs stomped and paced with familiar human impatience, now rearing up

over my bed, now prancing roguishly, finally thundering round and round in a murderous gallop that pinned me, sweating, to the side of my bed against the wall” (24-25). The nightmare mirrors the sexual abuse, the narrator’s experience of her father “in heat,” his “impatience” (19-20). The centaur’s interest is “unwholesome,” unnatural, like that of a father’s sexual interest in his daughter. The monster’s “erotic eyes” are also like those of her father, watching her hips as she crawls around at his feet; the “male head” he tosses “horse-style” reflects the frightening image of her father’s penis; the “hoofed legs,” his filthy boots. The centaur ultimately pins her, helpless, to her bed, positioned to rape her. She cries out to her mother for protection, but her mother cannot help her; it is the very absence of her mother that leaves her vulnerable in the role of substitute. She does not call the centaur a monster, for fear of “incurring its displeasure and spite,” just as she cannot acknowledge that her father’s actions are cruel, as, instead of protesting, she submits to the abuse and then silently leaves the room for fear that discovery would provoke him further.

b. Social Vulnerability

As a child, the narrator is alienated on all fronts; she effectively “belongs” nowhere. Experiencing alienation and isolation in her pre-migration environment makes the narrator more susceptible to those feelings post-migration because without a “feeling of belonging” in her pre-migration environment, she is less able to maintain a “sense of identity” and become fully integrated into her post-migration environment. As Grinberg and Grinberg note, those like the narrator, whose alienation and isolation pre-migration are especially intense, “will find that their problems become exacerbated during migration because the migratory

experience accentuates for a time the feeling of not belonging. One ceases to belong to the world one left behind and does not yet belong to the world in which one has newly arrived” (23). The narrator’s status as social outsider pre-migration predicts her continued alienation and isolation post-migration.

The narrator’s alienation and isolation extend beyond the family unit to society at large, where the family’s privileged socioeconomic status elevates them above the vast majority of the Burmese population. The family compound, a sign of the wealth attained by the narrator’s grandfather through his official roles, first as economic advisor to the king and, after the monarchy’s ouster, as minister of forestry and agriculture, shields them from the abject poverty that surrounds them. Her father’s role in the hilltribe rebellion also puts the family at odds first with the government and later with the military, making their isolation necessary for political reasons as well. Behind the walls of the compound, the narrator is safe, but she is also denied any meaningful connection to the outside world: she only leaves the compound to attend school, and even then she is carefully transported door-to-door by a driver.

The narrator’s religion is another factor increasing her alienation. She lives in a predominantly Buddhist and Hindu society, but her mother converted to Catholicism before her death. Out of deference, her grandmother sends her to a school run by Irish nuns, where she suffers through endless “rosaries, confessions, and sermons that glorified punishment and gore” (Law-Yone 94). The narrator is alone in her religious affiliation: “the God who claimed me was not the same God who ruled over my family and friends” (25). And she desperately wants to be like the other girls she knows, whose initiation ceremonies, “enviously unlike” her

own, involve beautiful, ornate costumes and gifts. By contrast, her First Communion is a solemn occasion, the “savagery” of which sickens her as she takes part in “the odious duty of having to devour the flesh and blood of a brutalized God whose suffering I was somehow responsible for” (27).

She is alienated from the wider community because of her religion, but she is also alienated from her religion. She did not choose to be Catholic. She has no Catholic adults in her life other than her teachers, who are Irish. And she does not understand Catholicism: “Faith was all mystery and teaser: a God with many masquerades [...]; a God that spoke in riddles to be accepted, not solved; a God that dreamed us up, let us loose, sat back to watch our mistakes, then held them against us, knowing all the while that we never stood a chance” (27). She comes to associate this vengeful Catholic god with her father: “Chance had singled me out to side with a God who was foreign to my world, but whose power over me was unanswerable. It was not unlike Father’s power. I could never have challenged him, either. Or counted his secrets” (28). In fact, during her nightmare of the centaur, as he has her pinned to the side of her bed, she cries out to her mother for help. Her mother’s ghost appears over her and tells her not to fear: ““God is watching over you”” (25).

The narrator finds no solace there. Her mother’s god watched her die; he sacrificed his own son; and he ignores the narrator’s suffering. Her god is even complicit in her abuse: “But, waking, I thought: If God is watching, if He sees and lets such things happen, there is no telling what He might do next” (25). Her god does not ease her suffering or give her a place of refuge; if anything, he condones it.

c. Cultural Connectedness

The narrator's adverse social experiences contribute to her problematic cultural identity. Because of her family's background and her father's position, the entire family is socially marginalized, preventing them from engaging in the broader culture. Her religion further removes her from the mainstream, and she never expresses a strong identification with, attachment to, or pride in Burmese culture. The narrator's pre-migration cultural position is problematic because, as Tseng notes, immigrants who do not have strong cultural ties to their homeland, typically try to assimilate quickly post-migration; however, when they are unable to adapt quickly enough or are not well-received by the host culture, they suffer from alienation and isolation (703).

Shan: The Seeds of Madness

a. Biological Vulnerability

Genetic predisposition is the main biological vulnerability affecting the development of major psychiatric disorders in immigrants (Tseng 697; Veling and Susser 65, 73). The accuracy of the narrator's account of Shan's life history is unclear because her knowledge of her brother's past is primarily based on the stories he tells her, which, in light of his eventual descent into schizophrenia, may be delusional. Provided, however, that the information given about his mother is correct, Shan is genetically predisposed to mental illness. According to Shan, his mother was their father's first wife, the young hilltribe girl the narrator imagines as she retells the story of the buttons. Following the birth of Shan and his stillborn twin brother,

his mother suffers a psychotic break, becoming a wild-woman who roams the hills, seldom seen. The villagers characterize his mother's psychosis as a curse brought about by childbirth, but in retrospect the narrator suggests that the illness is genetic: "But suppose the wild weed of insanity had been creeping through the woman even as Father bedded her?" In this context, his mother's madness foreshadows Shan's own battle with schizophrenia.

b. Psychological Vulnerability

Like the narrator, Shan is branded as the cause of his mother's demise. He is the twin of a stillborn, a bad omen: "It was childbirth, the villagers said, that drove his mother wild; it was he, the bad-luck baby, the sickly runt, that robbed her of her sleep and her mind" (Law-Yone 21). And like the narrator, Shan is haunted by images of his mother: "*This is how she looked in the dark. Baring his teeth in a jackal's grin, he could work up a mouthful of spittle and froth at the mouth. She came at me like this.* He showed me how she thrust out her hands like pitchforks, ready (to judge from the fire in her eyes) to rake him to shreds, but instead taking his head in her dirt-caked hands and shaking it with some sentiment akin to love" (21-22, orig. ital.). These memories reinforce Shan's insecurities in much the same way as the images of the narrator's mother provide a constant reminder of her own inadequacies. While the narrator's insecurities stem from how different she is from her mother, Shan's are reinforced by how similar he is to the madwoman. Shan, in remembering the madness of his mother, realizes on some level that he is beginning to show signs of the same illness or at least has the potential to become like her.

In addition to the obvious emotional toll his mother's insanity and abandonment have on him, Shan is severely traumatized by his father's emotional and physical abuse. His father senses weakness in him, a characteristic he cannot tolerate, so when he notices that Shan begins to stutter, "he reckoned the only cure would be to knock it out of the boy" (Law-Yone 108). He begins a campaign of surprise attacks, ambushing Shan and striking him across the face "so suddenly and so hard that Shan was spun off his feet and sent staggering. He thought his head had fallen off, until he heard, along the side of his face, a clamor left by the blow" (108). His father's random assaults continue until Shan eventually grows out of the stutter, but the experience has set him permanently on edge, instilling in him the unshakeable sense that he is under constant threat.

Shan is further traumatized by the bullying and sexual abuse he suffers at the hands of a servant named Nankee, a girl eleven years his senior who he first encounters at the mission where his father sends him as a young boy. Nankee is a half-caste, a pariah, and she resents Shan, the precious son of the respected revolutionary leader. She bullies him relentlessly. Every Sunday before mass, she strips him down and violently scrubs him in ice-cold water, telling him, "This is to wash off your sins, little worm [...] this is to cleanse you of your mother's slime." One morning, Shan snaps and bites Nankee's bosom. She whimpers and runs to get the nuns, who find him "shivering in the bath. Red with anger, one of them went for his ears, boxing and pulling on them. She shook him until his teeth rattled, and called him a savage. Still wet and shivering, he was made to kneel naked in a corner, reminded again and again that his father would hear of his bestiality" (109).

Ten years later, when Shan returns to Rangoon with his father, they bring Nankee with them as a servant. But despite his age and authority, her power over him continues. On one occasion, she sexually assaults him, forcing his hand to rub “her scratchy crotch, even working his fingers so they parted the thick scrub to feel the slippery divide” (112). Terrified, Shan pushes her into a closet, trapping her. When the narrator, just four years old, discovers Nankee there, she tattles to her father, not realizing the inevitable result. Their father calls Shan into the room and, wasting no time, seizes him and strikes him across the face with an open hand. The narrator is shocked. The look of pure terror on Shan’s face, “the terrific smack of flesh striking flesh,” Shan’s failure to defend himself, and the narrator’s feeling of inexorable guilt paralyze her. For Shan, the episode is yet more validation that defending himself, that refusing to be abused, is impermissible. For the narrator, witnessing her father’s violence and her brother’s inability to fight is, at first, confusing. Why did Shan not stand up for himself? Then the answer comes, and the shape of it cements forever her view of their father: “I knew the answer, of course. I could have cried out for having forgotten it: It was simply that we were helpless, we would always be helpless against Father’s crushing rule. How could I have thought even for a moment that we stood a chance?” (112).

c. Social Vulnerability

Shan’s social experience is interesting. Unlike the narrator, who is alienated for different reasons from different groups – from the family through their abuse and from the broader society because of her family’s status and her religion – Shan is alienated in every context because he is always “half.” He is always a half-member in every group. He comes

into the world as the other half of his stillborn twin brother. He only belongs in the village because of his mother; he is not a full-blooded member of the tribe. He only belongs in the family compound because of his father; the other members of the family are the relatives of the narrator's mother. Of his small group of friends, all of whom are outsiders living on the margins of society, he is the only member of the upper-class. Like the narrator, he effectively "belongs" nowhere, and, like the narrator, this predisposes him to intense feelings of alienation and isolation post-migration.

d. Cultural Connectedness

Because Shan is not fully connected to any one social group, drifting from one to the next, he is unable to forge a solid "identity of self," which is problematic in itself, but it also forecloses his ability to feel truly connected to any one culture pre-migration (Bhugra 246). As a result, Shan experiences cultural confusion and ultimately deculturation, the "complete loss of cultural identity" post-migration. As Bhugra notes, acculturation is closely linked to "identity of self"; lacking a solid identity pre-migration will hinder the individual's ability to forge a new identity post-migration (246). Unlike the narrator, who has formed an identity of self, albeit a problematic one, Shan does not know who he is; he has been unable to reconcile the various parts of his experience into a clear identity. The only expressions of himself are the grandiose tales he recounts of his adventures, which, even as a child, the narrator suspects are distortions of reality at best and complete fabrications at worst. Post-migration, he has no way to forge a new identity in a new environment where, disoriented, he is no longer "among symbols he recognized and people who reflected the image of himself he wanted to see"

(Law-Yone 75-76). The only piece of his old environment he has left to hold onto and use to define himself is the legend of the coffin tree, but, ultimately, that is not enough.

The Narrator and Shan: Shaken from Slumber

a. Involuntary Departure

Involuntary migrants have an increased risk of developing mental illness post-migration (Bhugra 247). For those who are forced to flee, the stress and trauma experienced at the time of departure, as well as in the days, weeks, and months leading up to their migration may increase their vulnerability to mental illness (Perez-Foster 157). The narrator's and Shan's departure is precipitated by a military coup. In the early days of the coup, the military arrests, tortures, and kills the heads of many upper-class families who, like the narrator's grandfather, grew rich harvesting the opium fields and exploiting the country's natural resources in the wake of the colonial government. Their father, who inherited his father's wealth, is now leading the hilltribes in their rebellion against government control of the opium fields. (His men refer to him as "the General," but he has no position in the actual military.) When the military overthrows the government and takes control of the opium fields, their father's role in the rebellion, coupled with the source of his inherited wealth, makes him an enemy of the state. The narrator's father can no longer risk returning to Rangoon because soldiers frequently come to the compound unannounced, looking for him and interrogating members of the household about his activities. The entire family faces increasing scrutiny.

In response, the narrator's family collapses in on itself, sealing the compound, hiding indoors, her aunts leaving only to buy necessities. Assuming the futility of protest, they

“accept everything as if there were no alternative even to dream about or talk about and keeping down our voices and hopes” (Law-Yone 33). Silence becomes their refuge, apathy, their collective defense: “I began to see some wisdom in my relatives’ ways. Once I had thought of my aunts’ lack of curiosity as a form of willful blindness undeserving of pity; now I became incurious myself [...] I was protected by the kind of apathy induced by long war movies in which the excess of noise, violence, and death cauterizes the senses and makes it all meaningless” (31). Already detached from her emotions as a result of the abuse she suffers, the narrator retreats even farther inward, focusing on the small universe of her body: “What weighed on me were my own small physical ailments [...]. I was prone to gulping air [...]. I ground my teeth at night [...] obsessed by fungus and mold, I sniffed everything [...]. I slept and slept” (32). The narrator learns to ignore all worlds outside the present moment, to focus instead on the immediate concerns of the body and the household chores, a strategy she will employ again in reaction to the stress of immigration. To survive in America, she will repress the pain of leaving home and deny herself the hope of a better future, becoming instead obsessed with day-to-day survival.

Shan, too, is taxed by the stress of the coup. His response to the family’s precarious position is to assure them, and himself, of his heroism: “there was a theme – and a resolution – to most of his stories. The theme was violence and the resolution was in his emergence as a hero” (38). Perhaps realizing that Shan is beginning to show signs of mental illness, the narrator begins to question his increasingly grandiose tales: “Shan seemed no longer to make distinctions between the actual and the imagined” (37). But when the narrator tries to challenge Shan’s veracity, her aunts silence her, recognizing that Shan’s stories are his way of

coping, one of many unspoken pretenses shared by the family: “Though I was nearly twenty, my aunts still pretended I was a child. Uncle, a married man with six children, pretended he was a bachelor. Shan pretended he was a fearless champion of the weak and the preyed upon. And everyone pretended that Father’s absence was only temporary” (38). Behind the walls of the compound, the family creates a world that allays their fear of what lurks on the other side.

When the violence peaks in Rangoon, the siblings are shaken from sleep early one morning, shuffled into a jeep by one of their father’s men, and handed a small bag of light-weight clothing and five-hundred dollars in cash, assured that everything else can be acquired later. Their father has arranged for them to flee to America “because war and bloodshed were in the wind,” and he fears they will be captured, tortured, or killed. The suddenness of their departure is so shocking that they fall mute, unable to express their goodbyes to their family, who seem to realize more than they the finality of their journey: “When we had climbed into the waiting jeep, our aunts clung to our wrists, unable to speak. Rosie’s face looked shrunken and shocked. Uncle was stammering [...]. Lily finally was able to say, ‘Go then; go if you must!’ as if any of it were our doing [...]. This was our farewell to home” (43). The narrator and Shan experience a devastating psychological loss: as involuntary immigrants, they are denied “the protective rite of farewell,” and the fear leading up to their departure and its abruptness are traumatic (Harlem 462). They are forced to leave under threat of death, and they take with them only what they can carry. For them, “the connection with the home society is completely disrupted, and the outcome of the migration, in terms of the duration of living in a foreign place, and the final solution regarding the move are uncertain” (Tseng 700). With a background of pre-migration abuse, neglect, and trauma, the siblings, already

vulnerable, are thrown from the unstable ground of their lives in Burma to the uncertain shores of America, unprepared for the travail that awaits them.

2. Post-migration: Lost in the Urban Jungle

When they first arrive in New York, the narrator is twenty years old and Shan is thirty, but they are like children suddenly expected to run before even learning to sit upright. Their early days in New York are marked by intense alienation and isolation, as the siblings, all alone in a strange world, face adversity at every turn, becoming more and more taxed as they struggle to survive. The factors at this stage that increase the siblings' vulnerability to mental illness are a) language proficiency, b) culture shock, c) socioeconomic status, d) discrepancy between aspirations and reality, and e) social support.

a. Language Proficiency

Proficiency in the language of the new society significantly influences the immigrant's vulnerability to mental illness post-migration because language difficulties frequently hinder the individual's ability to adjust, leading to social alienation and isolation (Tseng 699; Bhugra 245; Furnham and Bochner 97; Perez-Foster 155). Both the narrator and Shan are familiar with English pre-migration, but the narrator's proficiency is much higher because she was a star student in the Catholic school she attended, where the curriculum was taught in English and "any lapse into pidgin was punishable by one hundred corrective lines in the King's English" (Law-Yone 9). Shan became literate during the year he spent at the mission as a child, but the extent of his knowledge of formal English stops there. In both cases, the

teachers were Irish nuns, so the pair is unfamiliar with the accents, dialects, and subtleties of American speech and the social and cultural cues it carries.

When they arrive in New York City, they know enough to get by, but they still struggle to find “the right voices, the right words” to navigate the labyrinth of America’s largest city (45). At first, they cannot function in the language at the level necessary to find employment as anything other than dish washers. Even later, when the narrator finds a clerical job, she continues to face obstacles in her attempts to communicate effectively. For example, she is unfamiliar with American idioms and misunderstands her boss when he fires her: “I’m sorry. You don’t cut the mustard. I’m afraid we’re going to have to let you go.” She defiantly responds, “If I don’t cut the mustard, why are you afraid?” When he explains, “It’s an expression [...] Someday, when your English is better, you’ll understand it,” she is utterly humiliated (56). She then returns to the hotel and tells Shan, “I didn’t cut the mustard.” When he, too, is confused by the expression, she remarks, “You see? Our English just isn’t good enough” (57). In another early experience, the pair is invited to a dinner party where, realizing they are “[u]nequal to the level and pace of conversation, we remained mute, regretting the mistake of our presence there” (48). While the narrator and Shan are able to function well enough to get by, they are discouraged by the low level of their proficiency. The narrator is particularly frustrated because the confidence she had in her language abilities pre-migration is undermined by her initial experiences with American English.

b. Culture Shock

Culture shock is “precipitated by the anxiety that results from losing all our familiar signs and symbols of social intercourse.” The concept has been adopted by the mental health disciplines to describe the “primarily emotional reaction that follows from not being able to understand, control, and predict the behavior” of members of the host society (Furnham and Bochner 49). Culture shock is a response to both the unfamiliar physical setting and social environment, and the intensity of the culture shock experienced depends on the degree of difference between the home and new cultures. In situations where the cultural differences are extreme, it may be several years before the individual is able to adapt well enough to function in the new culture, and the intensity and duration of the individual’s experience of culture shock and the accompanying alienation may further increase his/her vulnerability to mental illness (Bhugra 246).

The siblings’ experience of culture shock is intense: “Even when times were hard, the life we left behind had run along a groove cut by tradition, familiarity, and habit. But arriving in New York, my brother and I fell out of that groove, and finding our footing was nearly as awkward as the astronauts’ first steps in the atmosphere of the moon” (Law-Yone 44). They arrive in New York two months after the first moon landing, an event they watch on a giant television in a Fifth Avenue store and which serves as an apt metaphor for their own alienation. They are utterly confounded by their new environment:

In those early days it seemed as if we had been thrown into a colossal obstacle course where machinery, gadgetry, and mystery of one sort or another stood in our way at every turn. All around us, hordes of people were breezing through those same obstacles without a second thought: waiting for the right buses, running down the right entrances to the subways, dropping the right change

into the right slots, not even needing to look up from their papers to get off at the right stops, pushing the right buttons on elevators, giving their orders at restaurants and cafeterias in the right voices, the right words. We had had glimpses of these marvels in the movies back home, but seeing an elevator on film is inadequate preparation for stepping into one for the first time without getting crushed by the heavy, ineluctable doors, and then recovering in time to press the right button. (46)

Nothing in this new environment is familiar. The physical setting is confusing; coming from post-colonial Rangoon to the urban streets of New York, even finding food and shelter, the most basic requirements for survival, seems an impossible task. As Bhugra notes, “migration from a rural to an urban environment may be particularly stressful,” as “the recipient urban culture may be threatening, less welcoming, and frankly rejecting” (247). While Rangoon is not “rural,” it is underdeveloped, and the degree of difference between it and New York City is vast. The narrator and Shan have no idea how things “work” in their new physical environment, and no one is willing to stop and show them.

The social environment is equally daunting. As the intensity of culture shock may be mitigated or exacerbated by the host society’s reception of the immigrant (Oguz 56), the siblings’ initial interactions with Americans are discouraging. On their first visit to a department store, the pair attempts to bargain “bazaar-style” with the saleswoman in the shoe department. They haggle with her over a twenty-five-dollar pair of sandals, failing to understand that she is not refusing to lower the price as a negotiation tactic, but rather because the price is non-negotiable: “The saleswoman began to treat us like morons, shouting, ‘Twenty-five! Twenty-five! Twenty-five!’ Red-faced, we abandoned the sandals and the store” (Law-Yone 44-45). The siblings’ early attempts to engage in ordinary day-to-day activities such as this only serve to undermine their attempts to adjust, and the unwelcome

reception increases their anxiety and encourages their isolation, prolonging their experience of culture shock (Oguz 56).

They finally manage to rent a room in a run-down hotel on the Upper West Side, where the desk clerk is willing to advise them on basic matters. They also decide to contact a man named Morrison, whom they remember as an occasional visitor in Rangoon but have not seen in nearly five years. Their father's man instructed them to contact Morrison upon arrival in New York, assuring them that he would help them with whatever they needed and that their father would regularly send Morrison money to support them in the States. But their experience with Morrison only deepens their sense of alienation and isolation, underlining the hostile reception they have already experienced and making them acutely aware of their inability to effectively communicate and understand American culture.

Contacting Morrison proves to be more difficult than they had hoped. The letter they send from their hotel to his address comes back undeliverable. Having no other way to contact him, they scour the phonebook, calling every Morrison until they find one whose voice they recognize, but it's a recording. Having never experienced an answering machine, the narrator and Shan are confused; is this some trick? Some kind of secret message? They call the number over and over for weeks, hanging up at the beep each time, not understanding the purpose of the answering machine or the expectation that they should leave a message. When Morrison finally answers, his response is not what they expected: "Instead of offering to pick us up immediately and take us back to his home, he invited us to dinner – and on a day that was three weeks away" (Law-Yone 46). The two are confused by this exchange; unfamiliar with the cultural cues and norms in American society, they are unaware that Morrison's

response reflects that he is not aware of the severity of their circumstances and/or feels no obligation to help them. In either case, he most likely has not been informed of their journey and knows nothing of their father's promises of money. Writing in retrospect, the narrator realizes that they should have understood that was the case, but at the time, they weren't sure: "Maybe he thought it improper to raise the subject over the telephone. (We came from a purse-proud society where talk of money had its own rules of decorum.) Maybe he was waiting till we met in person" (46). The exchange with Morrison brings into relief the depth of their culture shock, the degree of difference between the home and new cultures (Bhugra 246).

Preparing for the dinner at Morrison's Park Avenue address presents other new challenges, as the pair attempts to navigate unfamiliar cultural expectations. They search for appropriate clothes to wear to Morrison's Park Avenue address, settling on a "shiny suit that drooped at the shoulders" for Shan and a "lime green dress with shoes to match" for the narrator, not realizing how strange their outfits will appear or how uncomfortable they will be in the chilly autumn air. Many years later, the narrator is reminded of their "bumbling stabs at presentability" when she comes across a cartoon representation of an immigrant, "a cloddish-looking fellow in a folksy costume and a belled cap, holding a tambourine and saying, 'And now I will sing you a song of my country'" (Law-Yone 46). Making their way across New York go the two of them, "bumbling" immigrants from a cartoon.

Their reception at Morrison's is not welcoming. They soon realize that they have been invited to a large, formal dinner party, where they are desperately out of place. Morrison's wife is cold and Morrison is uncomfortable in their presence. As a young bachelor, he had

visited with their father and shown interest in the rebellion, but now he is married, and the narrator and Shan “were faces out of a past he didn’t appear eager to recall” (47). Much later, the narrator sees that Morrison’s interest in Burma had been a passing phase, the adventure of an upper-class kid in the revolution of an exotic world, something that no longer holds his interest. Suddenly thrown into a formal, sophisticated atmosphere, the pair becomes painfully aware of their inadequacy, “sitting there in our chintzy clothes, while the Japanese butler smirked at our hesitations over the linen and silver” (48). They are unfamiliar with the rules of etiquette and equally baffled by the sophisticated conversation. They remain silent and leave as soon as possible, too embarrassed to ask for the money their father supposedly sent.

The narrator and her brother, already insecure, are demoralized by the failed attempt to connect with someone they believed would be a friend, a line to the shore. But still unsure of the meaning behind their awkward experience, they make another phone call the next day, having worked up the courage to face “the indecency of asking for money.” The exchange with Mrs. Morrison underlines the disastrous result of the pair applying the norms of their own culture to their interactions with Americans (a problem they repeat later with the Lanes). When the narrator asks whether the Morrisons have received any money from her father, Mrs. Morrison responds with an air of condescension that the narrator describes as “the Voice of America.” Explaining haughtily that “Mr. Morrison and I have not been involved with your part of the world for many years now” (48), she suggests that if the narrator were to just ask for money directly, they could maybe “work something out” (49). The suggestion that the narrator beg for money is an egregious violation of Burmese cultural norms, and Mrs. Morrison acknowledges that is likely the case, but, in typical American upper-class style, she

completely disregards it: “Now, we know it isn’t easy for you and your brother here, so far from home. You come from a proud family; it must be hard for you to ask for help” (48). The narrator abruptly hangs up, humiliated. There will be no money sent by their father. They are on their own.

c. Socioeconomic Status

The siblings’ poverty further increases their vulnerability to mental illness. Several additional studies identify “socioeconomic disadvantage as a risk factor”(69) for mental illness in immigrant populations, particularly in “decaying inner-city areas” (Veling and Susser 68). Poverty also contributes to increased levels of alienation (Furnhman and Bochner 97), and studies conducted in several immigrant populations found that “poor housing conditions” play a role in the development of depression and the increased risk of suicide (Loue 62). With the realization that their poverty will not be mitigated, and as the money they brought with them from Burma dwindles, the narrator and Shan become resigned to an environment shockingly different from the luxury of their family compound in Rangoon.

Because they do not know how to rent an apartment or they simply cannot afford one, they move to an even cheaper hotel in a yet seedier neighborhood where they live among “junkies, pimps, and whores.” They subsist mainly on rice and “whatever went on sale at the corner grocery store: dented cans of string beans or mushroom soup; a head of discolored cabbage; a packet of lentils” (Law-Yone 51). And they are ill-prepared for their first winter: “Then came the rush of crippling cold: the piercing air, the wind lashing through our cheap,

foam-lined loden coats, our aching toes inside the rubber boots, the fear for our fingers and ears” (51). Malnourished and freezing, their survival is always in question.

For Christmas, Shan sticks strips of the green insulating tape he finds under their sink onto the window in the shape of a Christmas tree and places under it “three lumpy packages” wrapped in aluminum foil, presents for the narrator. She opens them to find a hairbrush, woolen tights, and a knitted cap. She protests, knowing that the items cost as much as a week’s worth of groceries, but Shan insists, ““So we’ll starve [...] But at least one of us won’t freeze”” (52). The depth of their poverty suddenly overwhelms her, and the narrator shuts herself in the bathroom, “where I stood over the sink for a long time, washing my face again and again until I had composed myself” (52). For the rest of the day, she pretends nothing is wrong, that they are safe, that they will survive, but the extent of their poverty and the bleak future facing them have infused her with an unremitting despair.

d. Aspirations v. Reality

Closely linked to the drop in socioeconomic status experienced by so many immigrants is the discrepancy between their initial aspirations and the reality confronting them. Veling and Susser, in summarizing the findings of various sociological studies, suggest that immigrants, “having a disadvantaged position [...] may experience a particularly large gap between their goals and the opportunities to achieve them, and thus may be at higher risk for mental illness.” They conclude, “the long-term experience of social defeat, defined as a subordinate position or as ‘outsider status’, may be an explanation for the increased incidence” of mental illness, particularly schizophrenia, among immigrants (70-71).

As the pair begins to look for work, they soon find that their expectations are unrealistic: “We were so poorly prepared for the tests of survival in a changed habitat that we started out with blind ambition—blind to our own limitations” (Law-Yone 51). The midlevel clerical and sales jobs for which they would be qualified in Burma – though, even then, it would be a step down -- they have no chance of getting in the States. They ultimately realize that their mediocre English, cultural awkwardness, and lack of experience make them unemployable. They resign themselves to reality: “we lowered our sights until we sank to the grind of washing dishes and waiting on tables at any restaurant that would hire us as a pair” (51). They work long hours, barely scraping by.

The reality of their limitations disabuses Shan of any hope for a better future, as the “long-term experience of social defeat” described by Veling and Susser begins to take its toll. At this point, the signs of schizophrenia Shan exhibited pre-migration become more noticeable, and the narrator’s ability to adapt begins to outpace Shan’s. The narrator accepts the reality that they are not, now, able to attain a better life, but, unlike Shan, she is not resigned to poverty. She continues to aspire to something greater. She learns to type on an old typewriter Shan finds on the street; he begins but quickly loses interest and gives up. She finally gets a clerical position; he stays in the hotel room and sinks into a pattern of “chronic tiredness and drowsiness” (Law-Yone 54). She begins to learn the ropes; he becomes paranoid and withdrawn.

When Shan suffers a bout of cerebral malaria, the narrator loses her job, unable to meet the demands of her position while also struggling to save her brother. The narrator’s situation illustrates the truly herculean effort required of immigrants who, in the face of

poverty and the stress of adjustment, still aspire to achieve some semblance of the “American Dream.” Her boss’s lecture encapsulates the reality immigrants are faced with; mainstream culture is both ignorant to and unforgiving of their plight: “You’re a bright girl, basically, and I know that most Oriental people are honest and hardworking. I’ve seen many others who’ve come here from your part of the world – real go-getters, starting from scratch and making it. But you’ve got to want to be somebody. You’ve got to have values. I can’t teach you commitment. You’ve got to be committed yourself. [...]. I’m afraid we’re going to have to let you go.” (56)

The irony, of course, is that she does, in fact, want to be somebody; she is hardworking; she is a “go-getter” who is “starting from scratch.” The problem is that her moral obligation to care for her brother, who is struggling to live and has no one else to help him, is competing with her ability to enact the American work ethic. Her inability to explain her situation to her boss, knowing that her circumstances are irrelevant and will only be held against her, further illustrates the double-bind. Her boss’s expectation that she be a stereotypical “Oriental” immigrant worker, rather than an individual human being who needs help, also reveals American society’s hostile reception of immigrants – a harsh reality to face when reaching for the American Dream.

e. Social Support

Because immigrants leave so many people behind, losing important relationships and social connections, access to adequate social support in the new environment is critical in the prevention of mental illness (Bhugra 246; Furnham and Bochner 185). Furnham and Bochner

cite a significant body of research finding that “social support is directly related to increased psychological well-being and to a lower probability of [...] mental illness,” while, conversely, “deficiencies in social support are related to the emergence of psychiatric symptoms” (185).

The narrator and Shan have very little social support: they know no other immigrants, Burmese or otherwise; they have no other family; they have no friends; their attempt to reach out to Morrison is met with rejection; and they are not members of any cultural or social group in the United States.

The siblings are alone, but they do still have each other, and immigrating with family is generally a protective factor against psychological distress (Desjarlais et al. 146). There are, however, situations when that is not the case. When one member of the family suffers from a serious mental illness, the ability of the others to adjust to and function in their new environment is threatened (Tseng 708). The narrator and Shan migrate and live together, which in the early stages of their adjustment protects them from a more intensely stressful experience, but as the stressors of migration increase Shan’s vulnerability and he finally reaches his breaking point, his descent into schizophrenia begins to affect the narrator’s adjustment as well. The effects of the absence of social support are made even more profound because Shan’s illness prevents them from accepting the help that is offered to them.

As a child, the narrator’s bond with her brother is the most significant connection she has to another human being, and he is her only source of reassurance: ““You are healthy and strong, and very, very smart. [...] Also, you are my sister; I’ll look after you.”” With her big brother by her side, “the world with all its risks and dangers seemed to shrink a little, into something almost manageable” (Law-Yone 16). When they first arrive in America, their

alliance keeps them safe; as long as they are together, they will survive: “we pitted ourselves against The Others—first as children, and later as wary immigrants” (191). But suffering alone and in poverty, the narrator and her brother grow desperate. They have managed to survive for six months but are aware that they may not survive much longer, so they decide to reach out to the only other contact their father gave them, a journalist named Benjamin Lane. After their experience with the Morrisons, they at first resolve never to contact Lane, for fear that he, too, would have no interest in helping them. But they have no choice; they cannot survive alone.

Lane surprises them. Immediately aware of their plight, he and his wife take them into their “chaotic household of eight children, rotating in-laws, dogs, cats, and macaws” (58), giving them a room of their own in the basement, which “[a]fter the Hotel Macy [...] had the feel of a hot drink on a cold night” (58). While the Lanes accept the siblings into their family and could be a valuable source of social support, Shan’s ability to adjust has already halted, making it impossible for him to fully acclimate to yet another foreign environment. Because the two have been operating as a unit, Shan’s inability to accept the Lanes’ help also prevents the narrator from bonding with the family. Living on the outskirts of a family whose members are deeply connected with each other only heightens the narrator’s and Shan’s loneliness.

Even if the narrator and Shan were able to fully engage with the family, the quality of the social support gained would be undermined by the cultural differences and the gross disparity between the characteristics of the support provided within the Lane family and that provided within the siblings’ family of origin. The Lanes’ immediate intimacy and openness are alien to the siblings, whose culture is extremely reserved. In Burma, intimacy is gradually

built, even within families, over a period of several years; in the siblings' own family, there was no intimacy, only distance, silence, and seething anger. They are also confused by the free expression of emotion and energy: "The size and sheer rambunctiousness of their family gave me palpitations [...]. I wasn't used to the routine brawls (between children and parents, children and children, or parent and parent); to the back talk, the shouting matches, the swings of emotion [...]; to the offhand brutality of a large family" (59). The narrator and Shan again experience culture shock, unable to discern the appropriate behaviors, unable to interpret the actions of others (Furnham and Bochner 49). In Burma, children are quiet, never challenging their parents, and women are respectful of their husbands, who rule the house. Within their own family, the narrator and Shan would never challenge an adult, raise their voices, or share their emotions. Unable to interpret the Lane's acceptance of them in terms of American culture, they superimpose the cultural norms of Burmese society and their own experience as children; they feel like guests whose welcome can be out worn, rather than members of a surrogate family.

In this environment, the narrator and Shan become alienated; they withdraw from the family, isolating themselves in the basement. As the months pass, they become paranoid: "Aimless, rootless, full of inadmissible fears, we withdrew into our self-made limbo, convinced that the Lanes were counting the hours until our departure" (Law-Yone 60). Feeling they are an unbearable burden, they make themselves invisible, absenting themselves from family meals, sneaking upstairs to "steal" meager amounts of food when everyone else is sleeping, creating for themselves the illusion of independence, of "bogus pride" (61). As their isolation intensifies, so does Shan's aberrant behavior and paranoia, further undermining

the possibility of adjusting to the family and benefiting from the social support offered. After a year with the Lanes, Shan convinces the narrator that they should leave New York and drive south. Alone again, they head down the coast in an old Chrysler that the Lanes sign over to them for a dollar. Having become profoundly alienated and isolated from the family, the narrator and Shan again have only each other to lean on.

3. The Emergence of Mental Illness: Suffering in Isolation

Symptoms of mental illness can arise at any point during migration but may not reach clinical levels until the immigrant has lived in the new society for several years. The individual may appear to be adjusted and functioning well before symptoms begin to interfere with his/her daily life, but when they do, it is likely that the stress of the migration process precipitated the illness (Tseng 698). The narrator and Shan both succumb to mental illness post-migration; Shan's symptoms reach clinical levels two years after their arrival in the States, and the narrator follows two years later.

Shan's Descent into Schizophrenia

Two years post-migration, Shan succumbs to schizophrenia, a condition to which he is vulnerable as a child and the symptoms of which become increasingly acute as the siblings face adversity in the States. Schizophrenia is "a mental disorder characterized by a person's abnormal patterns of thought and perception, as inferred from his or her language and behavior" (Corcoran and Walsh 412). According to Dziegielewski and Green, "The essential features of schizophrenia are a mixture of characteristic signs and symptoms," which "are

often multifaceted”; “in schizophrenia, different positive and negative symptoms will always occur” (257). Positive symptoms involve “the development of delusions (distortions of thought content), conceptual disorganization (grossly disorganized speech or grossly disorganized or catatonic behavior), hallucinatory behavior (distortions of perception), excitement or restlessness, grandiosity, suspiciousness/persecution, and hostility” (257). Delusions are “false beliefs that a person maintains even though they are overwhelmingly contradicted by social reality” (Corcoran and Walsh 412), and frequently contain “ideas of reference, which are delusions having a theme or involving one certain idea.” The themes may be “religious, persecutory, or grandiose” (Dziegielewski and Green 257). Hallucinations are usually auditory, but may also be visual, olfactory, gustatory, or tactile. Negative symptoms “involve behaviors that should be present but are absent.” For example, negative symptoms include “avolition (lack of goal-directed behavior), emotional withdrawal, poor rapport, passivity, apathy, social withdrawal, difficulty in abstract thinking, [...] and stereotyped thinking patterns” (258).

Many people who develop schizophrenia show “premorbid or ‘early warning’ signs: a slow, gradual development of symptoms, social withdrawal, a loss of interest in life activities, deterioration in self-care, and a variety of ‘odd’ behaviors,” which can exist for many years before the onset of diagnosable schizophrenia (Corcoran and Walsh 414). While the specific cause of schizophrenia is not known, the “stress/diathesis theory” holds that the disease results from a combination of biological factors, such as genetic vulnerability, and environmental and stress factors, such as “insults to the brain, threatening physical environments, emotionally intrusive or demanding experiences, emotional deprivation, and

disruptions to cognitive processes” (417). As Herz and Lamberti note, “acute symptoms of illness will result when the level of stress induced by challenging events exceeds [the individual’s] threshold of vulnerability” (544-545). In this way, the stressors of the migration process accumulate until their effects ultimately exceed Shan’s threshold and he begins his descent into schizophrenia.

At the pre-migration stage, Shan is genetically predisposed to schizophrenia. He is further rendered vulnerable by the physical abuse he suffers at the hands of his father, particularly the numerous attacks to his head, which may have resulted in traumatic brain injury, “often cited as a contributing cause of the disorder, [...] when there is already genetic loading” (Corcoran and Walsh 419). As a result of this and the other pre-migration factors discussed above, some signs of the disease begin to manifest while Shan is still in Burma. He is restless and disinterested in self-care as he roams about the city for days at a time, only sporadically returning to the compound to bathe and change clothes. He also has difficulty regulating his moods, a common trait in schizophrenics (Herz and Lamberti 544): “He cried easily—from anger, nostalgia, sometimes over a song” (Law-Yone 11). But the main sign that surfaces pre-migration is his creation of delusions containing grandiose ideas of reference: “In telling his stories, Shan seemed no longer to make distinctions between the actual and the imagined,” and “there was a theme—and a resolution—to most of his stories. The theme was violence and the resolution was in his emergence as a hero” (37-38).

Post-migration, as the stressors of migration and adjustment take their toll and the siblings suffer in poverty, Shan’s symptoms become more prevalent. He is also rendered more vulnerable to the disease when he suffers a bout of cerebral malaria, an “insult to the brain”

(Corcoran and Walsh 417). Added to the extreme stress already experienced, the malaria is a breaking point for Shan, marking the beginning of a sharp decline in his condition. He becomes paranoid, fearfully warning the narrator, ““Don’t ever start anything with the police in this country. They do what they want. Say you’re driving along in a car and they stop you? If you don’t freeze at once, they blow your head off”” (Law-Yone 54).

When the pair moves into the Lanes’ home, Shan’s illness continues to progress as he and the narrator become increasingly alienated, isolating themselves in the basement. The paranoia they experience is a product of their isolation, but the intensity of it may be driven by the exacerbation of Shan’s symptoms. In this way, the narrator shares in Shan’s psychosis, his persecutory delusions; according to Dziegielewski and Green, “shared psychotic disorder” is a condition in which “delusions are present in an individual who is clearly influenced by someone else who has a longer-standing delusional system” (251). But while the narrator shares Shan’s persecutory delusions to a point, his symptoms rise to a level beyond her experience.

When the pair joins the Lanes and a group of their friends for dinner, Shan insists that the CIA is spying on one of their guests: ““Look, man, the CIA was in my country so I know. [...] They’ve taken over everything. Opium and everything. They know who’s going to be boss one day and who’s going to bugger off the next day. So you tell me there’s no CIA in your office?”” The others around the table are confused but try to laugh it off. Then Shan leans back in his chair “with a look of wild exasperation” and falls over. As the narrator rushes him downstairs, Shan looks at her “with hatred so new and direct” that she recoils: ““What the hell do you know about anything? [...] These people are all CIA. [...] You don’t

know. And they think I don't know. Ah, forget it'" (Law-Yone 62). With that, he goes to bed, and in the morning, he claims not to remember the entire episode. Shan's angry and confrontational outburst reveals the "hostility" characteristic of schizophrenia (Dziegielewski and Green 258), and his amnesia of the event illustrates the "memory impairment" common in those with the disorder (Corcoran and Walsh 412).

Shan begins spending all of his time lying in bed, either asleep or with his eyes closed and his arms folded across him, reflecting symptomatic emotional withdrawal, passivity, apathy, and social withdrawal (Dziegielewski and Green 258). These negative symptoms alternate with his exuberant fantasies about money-making schemes and adventures, manifestations of excitement, a positive symptom of schizophrenia (258). The narrator recognizes Shan's behavior; he did this in Rangoon, "eyes narrowed in acute expectation" of a momentous windfall, "enough to warrant the long wait, the gamble, the immobilizing fantasies." Back then, as now, he held grandiose beliefs that "one day his luck would change, bringing power, riches, and the means to use or abuse them on a kingly scale" (Law-Yone 63). Shan becomes incapacitated by his fantasies, convinced of his imminent success, and his restlessness precipitates their abrupt departure on what the narrator describes as "a long drive that would bring me face-to-face with the changes in his behavior that shook me to the core" (67).

The move to Florida is prompted by an ad Shan responds to for a second mate and factotum on a Morgan Out Islander headed to the Bahamas. To Shan, this is his chance to discover treasure, to amass immense wealth and power, but as the drive grows longer and longer, Shan's behavior becomes more and more troubling, his paranoia more intense. He

believes every stranger is out to get them, warning the narrator that “the thick accents of the attendants were put on to make fools of us.” But when they have to stop for repairs, “I saw him approach the mechanic with baffling insincerity. After his mistrust of every stranger encountered on the way, I found his sudden friendliness difficult to fathom.” Shan proceeds to flatter the mechanic, commenting on how intelligent he must be to understand how cars work, completely oblivious to the mechanic’s growing irritation. In retrospect, the narrator realizes, “it was at times most fraught with danger, when his fear had reached an all-consuming pitch, that he needed to outfox the stranger-enemy with sweet talk and subterfuge” (67). As Dziegielewski and Green explain, “the individual who suffers from schizophrenia experiences numerous and repeated states of terror that cause changes in behavior and hinders [sic] daily interactions with others. As a result, the individual develops an inability to distinguish fantasy from reality” (247).

Once they arrive in Florida, Shan’s irrational behavior intensifies. The ad promising a cruise to the Bahamas was a ruse; the man hired Shan to work as a maintenance man for less than minimum wage. Shan quits a week later, just as the narrator was planning to leave. She decides to stay to help him, but as she begins to look for work, Shan returns to the marina, hanging around with the man who tricked him into coming there. Shan feels sorry for him and begins to work for free. The narrator is dumbfounded: “In those days when I didn’t know better, I was forever confronting my brother with what I thought was unassailable logic. He was jobless, we were broke; how could he afford to offer free services to a man who had cheated him in the first place? But he was always ready with an answer, a rebuttal, an intimation of hurt to deflect my ever-practical questions.” Eventually, the man refers Shan to

his friend who owns a hotel in Vermont and is looking for someone to train as a cook. Shan takes the job and leaves “high on renewed hope of adventure and fortune,” while the narrator moves to Chicago to take a promising position and start night school, marking the first time since their arrival in the States that the two are separated (Law-Yone 71).

For the next eight months, things seem to be going well; Shan calls periodically, assuring the narrator that he is happy. And so she is taken by surprise when she comes home from work one day to find Shan, “sitting on the steps to my apartment. Surrounded by his bags, ragged, unshaven, pallid, he had never looked more like a refugee. And he had lost so much weight that I might not have known him on the street” (72). Shan’s appearance reflects the “deterioration in self-care” common in schizophrenics (Corcoran and Walsh 414). His description as a refugee is also fitting; he is back at square one, as if he just arrived in America, and he pulls her back with him in “the next two long years in which [he] fell apart” (Law-Yone 70).

At this point, Shan’s symptoms of schizophrenia are acute. He has intense, persecutory delusions, illustrated by his account of his time in the Vermont hotel. He describes the other workers as “bad guys” who, at first, were his friends, but after few months, asked him to move into a different room. Shan assumes it is because he is a “foreigner,” because he is “different,” because they “were going to teach [him] a lesson.” When the narrator asks Shan why they would do that, since they had been friendly up to that point, Shan insists that they were persecuting him. He claims that they started tormenting him at night by scratching or pounding at his door, but when he would open it, no one was there. He confronted them about it, but they had no idea what he was talking about. When the narrator does not immediately

respond to his story with outrage, he claims, ““They raped me, you know.”” The narrator is shocked, not by the claim, but “by [her] own disbelief” (73). Up to this point, she could believe he was treated badly, though he was probably exaggerating the extent, but now she knows he is lying, and the lying triggers her realization that he is experiencing a complete break with reality. The narrator becomes afraid not only for her brother but of him.

Living in the narrator’s apartment, Shan becomes convinced that everyone is out to get him: he is terrified of “the external world with its menacing strangers, portents, and events—a world [...] in which the man in the street harbored harmful thoughts and designs, in which passers-by talked about him in code” (74). His thoughts become disorganized: ““The earth is spinning too fast for me. One day I’m thrown here, another day I’m thrown there. I can’t find my way back (74) [...] I’m thinking about everything, and so I end up thinking about nothing” (77). His hallucinations also intensify: one day he says to her, ““I’m afraid for you, for the harm I might do you. The bad guys are inside me now,”” suggesting that his auditory hallucinations now include commands. He sits, catatonic, for hours “in front of a blank television screen, intensely tuned in to some invisible, inaudible broadcast,” a sign that his hallucinations are now visual in addition to auditory (75).

His behavior becomes “disorganized” (Dziegielewska and Green 257): he “paced the floor,” incessantly “pounding his thigh as if in answer to some terrible ache in his bones” (Law-Yone 75). When the narrator finally arranges for him to be admitted to the hospital, he begs her to change her mind: “The dreadful scene went on for hours—through every extreme of his changing reactions. One minute he was agreeable; the next minute he was wild with fear. On and on it went: from suspicion and hatred to sudden lucidity; from self-

recriminations over his illness to earnest, pleading vows to get well on his own. He cursed me and begged me. He even tried cunning—a pitifully transparent cunning” (76). Unable to go through with the hospital admission, the narrator relents. Over the next several months, she watches as his condition continues to spiral out of control until he finally dies of a heart attack.

The Narrator’s Descent into Psychotic Depression

Shan’s illness completely halts the narrator’s adjustment. He appears on her doorstep

at the point when I was beginning to feel some mastery of life in America, when I had learned to drive a car and file a tax return, when I had found steady work and made acquaintances, when I could look around me and consider all the possibilities the new world had to offer—it was at this point, two years after our arrival in the States, that I was taken captive for the next two long years in which my brother fell apart. (70)

Despite her traumatic pre-migration experiences and the significant stressors she has faced post-migration, the narrator has managed to survive, to adjust, to envision a promising future. But her success is fragile. Her brother’s return, coupled with the stress of caring for him as he unravels and ultimately dies, reveals how vulnerable she still is.

According to Corcoran and Walsh, when one family member suffers from mental illness, the ability of other members of the family to cope is influenced by “the severity of the disorder, the preservation of time for other activities, the ability to be proactive in seeking assistance, and the availability of outside support” (421). The narrator is unable to cope; Shan’s disorder is severe and absorbs all of her time; she is unable to seek assistance, and, as has been the case all along, there is no outside support. Her brother’s suffering becomes hers: “When a person has schizophrenia, a chronic state of emotional burden develops that is shared

by all family members. Common reactions include stress, anxiety, resentment of the impaired member, grief, and depression” (Corcoran and Walsh 421). The narrator is stressed. She suffers intense anxiety, sleeping with her bedroom door locked. Unable to seek help, afraid of betraying Shan, she becomes “the mother of the child he had become,” the “anchor to his unanchored self” (Law-Yone 74).

She sacrifices the hope she once had for a future, falling back into her childhood defenses, coping with her emotions by detaching: “his illness infected me with a great numbness that seemed to spread through flesh, bone, and spirit” (74). Feeling her own grip on reality slipping, the narrator tries to reject Shan’s illness as a moral failing, “nothing more than a breakdown of courage” (77). Afraid of her own vulnerability, she desperately tries to assure herself of her resilience, throwing herself to the other extreme: “I prided myself that while he was losing touch with the real things of the earth, I was confronting them solidly. His lack of courage led me into foolhardy displays of brazenness that I mistook for bravery. I walked the streets at unsafe hours; [...] I stood my ground, defiantly, at the hint of the pettiest slight or challenge” (78). And yet, despite these efforts, she remains trapped, unable to “see beyond the ground in front of my nose” (79), “a creature caught in the amber of the present” (149).

Unlike Shan, who is consumed by nostalgia, she feels no respite in memories of their “previous life,” and, stuck in the hell of his illness, the narrator sees no meaning in a “future [...] that held no promise.” Consequently, she takes “refuge in mindless, forgetful tasks” (149). She wakes up, prepares the meals for the day, goes to work, comes home, and cleans. Every day the routine is the same. Her anxiety drives her to compulsions: “I tidied and dusted

our small apartment as zealously as if accountable for every surface from ceiling to floor. [...] I spent a week chipping off paint—countless coats of old paint—from the network of pipes that ran from my little closet of a bathroom.” She fills notebooks “with interminable lists of unnecessary chores,” hoping to create the illusion of control (150).

Unable to feel full compassion for the one enslaving her, she pours herself into feeding him, just as her aunt’s only expression of concern for her was in cajoling her to eat: “In time, all my aspirations seemed to revolve around the pot on the stove, on the amount of food I could get him to eat. To compensate for the stinginess of my affection, I indulged him in his simpler cravings” (79). She stuffs him with the richest foods, the best desserts, and he becomes obese, the outward manifestation of her disgust for him. She grows to resent him, secretly wishing for his death. Then one evening, he complains of an upset stomach. She feeds him; he seems better. But, walking across the room, he begins pounding his chest in agony, and as she tries to bring him to the couch, he falls to the floor, motionless. She calls for help, but as the paramedics try to revive him, she hides in her bedroom with the door closed, “hands pressed over my ears to shut out any hint of a sentence pronounced by the voices outside. I wanted only to remain apart from the chaos that churned on the other side of the door, to hide [...] to escape from those terrors beyond my control” (82). She remains in her room until they have taken him away, knowing that he is already dead, knowing that her “despairing dreams had come to pass” (82).

Although it might seem that with Shan’s end, his hold over her is gone, she is not set free. At first, she feels liberated in the same way she felt liberated by her grandmother’s death -- the immediate source of her suffering gone -- but, as with her grandmother’s death, she

soon realizes that the heaviness, the emotional damage, will never be alleviated. Her life does not pick up where it left off before Shan's return; she finds herself in a hole out of which she cannot climb. Unable to recover from the emotional fallout and lacking a support network, she remains isolated, leaving her apartment only to go to work. She continues the compulsive cleaning, the notebooks full of lists. Her focus on day-to-day existence staves off the emotional turmoil that threatens to consume her otherwise, to put her "in danger of withering from the inside out" (150-151).

But her efforts are in vain. As her anxiety persists and intensifies, she falls deeper into depression. According to Corcoran and Walsh, the symptoms of a major depressive episode include:

anxiety, [...] emptiness, and emotional numbness; [...] agitation, [...] flatness of expression, and slowness of physical movement and speech; [...] guilt, shame, low self-esteem, helplessness, pessimism, hopelessness, and thoughts of death and suicide; [...] decreased ability to think and concentrate; [...] inability to experience pleasure; changes in sleep patterns; a loss of energy; feelings of fatigue; and somatic complaints. (261)

In addition to the symptomatic "anxiety" and "agitation" already exhibited in her compulsive cleaning, and the "emptiness" and "emotional numbness" she experienced as a child and even more intensely in Shan's final months, she begins to suffer disturbed "sleep patterns," waking in the middle of the night, the scene of his death playing over and over in her mind.

In response to the symptomatic feelings of guilt and shame overtaking her, she redoubles her efforts, detaching to a new level, experiencing intensified emptiness and emotional numbness as she lives on autopilot. She goes through the motions of her daily life, detached, numb, never expressing even a moment of joy, having a complete "inability to

experience pleasure” in anything that she does (Corcoran and Walsh 261). She becomes nothing more than a body going through the motions, a body completely detached from a mind, from emotion: “I withdrew in effect to the back of a thick one-way mirror where, believing myself to be of a piece with the observable world, I mimicked its populace and followed its ways, when all the time I was sealed off, unseen and unheard, in a solitary confinement of my own making” (Law-Yone 150). For the next year, she becomes more and more trapped within herself, steeping in the depression that is consuming her.

Then the news of her father’s death gives her a new, macabre goal: her life becomes a slow, deliberate march toward death. She receives a letter from one of her father’s men detailing his death, describing symptoms that mirror Shan’s heart attack. He relays to her the many times her father spoke of her “with fondness and pride,” his conviction that she is “destined for success.” He told his men that the narrator “is like me. Not marrow, but iron in her bones” (153). In response to the news, she does not grieve; she is not coaxed from the safety of her detachment: “Denial had become a way of life; it worked as a filter, diluting the strength of all compromising emotions: love, hate, anger, fear, grief.” She receives the news of her father’s death in the same manner she received the news first her grandmother’s death and then Shan’s: “Again, [...] I thought I felt relief,” but her expectation of freedom is replaced with suffocating heaviness (154). Her father’s death does not release her from his influence; it simply cements its inescapable nature.

The death of her father, the last surviving member of her family with significant power over her, sends her into a crisis, as she realizes that her suffering is not externally controlled but lives within her decaying mind. She breaks; her severe depression becomes psychotic,

“which occurs when a person has severe depression plus some form of psychosis, such as having disturbing false beliefs or a break with reality” (“Depression” 1). The narrator becomes delusional; after Shan’s death, she began to believe that she “had merely to wish for a death to have it take place” (Law-Yone 151). Now, with the death of her father, she is convinced. In her clouded logic, she sees herself as a harbinger of death, her life as a thread connecting the deaths of her tormentors, her curse causing their hearts to seize: “One by one my family had died; and I, the survivor, uncovered an identity I had never known. I could see now that I’d been born with the imprint: I had come into the world with a death (my mother’s) on my hands, and it seemed increasingly a duty – a family obligation almost – to leave the world in the same way” (27). Her belief that she has brought death to her family is an example of the kinds of delusions experienced in psychotic depression, such as “feeling as though someone has special powers to do things that other people cannot do” (“Symptoms” 2) and “the belief that someone is responsible for the death of a loved one” (“Depressive Psychosis” 1).

The narrator’s experience recalls a sermon she hears as a child. A murderer wakes one morning to find the corpse of his victim chained to him with a heavy iron chain, no lock, no key:

For days the murderer was forced to drag the body around with him throughout the house. To the bathroom. To the kitchen. To bed. He couldn’t undo the chain himself, and he couldn’t call for help, for then he would be exposing his crime.

Meanwhile, the body began to rot. It began to bubble up and fester. Then flies came in swarms. Maggots crawled in and out of its nose, its ears, its eyes. By and by the corpse was humming with dung beetles and orange crabs.

The murderer stayed chained to the body, because by then he was raving.

So, too, with mortal sin. It is a rotting corpse we drag around with us, until we confess and repent. (Law-Yone 27, orig. italics)

The narrator is chained to the corpse of her past – her mother, her grandmother, her brother, her father – and it is inescapable. She drags it with her throughout her apartment, constantly cleaning, trying to remove its stain from her conscience. Together, the burden of death, her inability to ask for help for fear of her crimes being uncovered, and the unbearable guilt she feels for the death of her family begin to drown her. In her flawed, desperate logic, she sees death as her only way out. Once aware of “this reality, this finality,” she becomes obsessed with “plotting my own end” (154). She succumbs to the “helplessness, pessimism, hopelessness, and thoughts of death and suicide” associated with depression (Corcoran and Walsh 261).

The mission to plot her end gives her disorganized mind one solid focus. Her suffering becomes bearable because she has a way to end it: “I began to open myself up to an end—a real end, not just the end of a long day or night, but the end of everything I knew and could no longer bear. And it was this vision—or lack of vision—that brought surcease to what could have been endless days, endless despair.” She develops the tunnel vision of suicide, as she realizes in retrospect: “In truth, my ability to think clearly and calculatingly about death was only the symptom of an ailment that was festering in the pit of my stomach. Or maybe it was my chest. Or my head. Or perhaps in all three” (Law-Yone 155). As in the priest’s sermon, the corpse she drags begins to “bubble up and fester,” the “flies” and “maggots” of darkness consume her (27).

As her psychotic depression deepens and her suicidal ideation intensifies, so do her “loss of energy; feelings of fatigue; and somatic complaints” (Corcoran and Walsh 261): “I was in the grips of a great fatigue—the fatigue of despair—and to step out or reach out in the direction of hope posed an effort of will that seemed far beyond my strength” (Law-Yone 154). Her limbs feel heavy under the weight of her despair, under the weight of the corpse pulling behind her. The energy required to go about her daily life becomes impossible. She begins to fear each day, “not just the activity, but also the inactivity.” Even just being awake is unbearable. She has to focus on simple rituals, “brushing my teeth, brewing coffee, then rinsing out my cup,” to be able to get up and ready for work (156). Then her vision begins to falter; she begins to hallucinate: “But when the time came to step out the door, when I could no longer put off facing the world—my eyesight would go. At first the colors of the street would explode into my vision [...] Then, everywhere I turned, the world was colored gray” (156). In her despair, she feels the overwhelming urge to cry out, to throw herself at the feet of strangers, but she remains mute, still hiding behind that “thick, one-way mirror” (150).

Suicidal fantasies provide her only relief. She imagines the possible scenarios, the different methods, the way it would feel, the discovery of her body. All of her fantasies are violent – blowing her brains out, setting herself on fire – and all of them create a scene: “I wanted to die in such a way as to create a stir, to make a statement or a splash. I wanted to be discovered in a shocking way, to have someone, anyone, walk into the scene of the crime and recoil in horror” (157). She wants to make external the explosion of anger and self-hatred she harbors within. Someone recoiling in horror at the severity of her “crime” would at least validate the profundity of her guilt, her despair. At times, she comes close to an attempt,

leaning over her bathroom sink, razorblade poised over her wrist, but she loses her resolve, “choking up from the futility of everything: my life, my troubles, my unseemly solutions. Then I had to brace myself against the cold sink and ask, with the heaviest of hearts, Oh, God, what went wrong? How have I come to this?” (158). But these moments of lucidity only intensify her despair.

Her depression is fed by isolation, made complete by Shan’s death, and her pain is exacerbated by her desire for human contact. Ironically, it is her first meaningful contact with another person, the promise of an end to her isolation, that ultimately leads to her suicide attempt: “even though I knew I was painting myself into a hopeless corner, that nothing could be thought about so intensely without its happening, I might not have made that leap in quite the same way if it hadn’t been for Commander Morgan” (158). Commander Morgan is an older man who lives in her apartment building. The narrator recognizes in him the same loneliness she feels, so when he makes an off-hand remark that someone as old as he could never hope to have dinner with a young woman like the narrator, she ignores the fact that he was not being serious and asks him to dinner. The thrill she feels at spending an evening with a man three times her age brings “home to me the fact of my arrested, impoverished life.” When they arrive at the restaurant, the narrator, eager to win his approval, insists that she pay. He looks at her uncomfortably, and from that point on, the narrator feels “the inevitability of a letdown to an evening I had approached with almost feverish anticipation.” Every interaction after that confirms that she has ruined her chance. Over the course of the meal, the narrator increasingly senses that he “had lost interest. He was answering my questions almost reluctantly, no longer concerned to keep an exchange going” (162). Her experience with “the

Commander” resembles her experience with her father, “the General,” and her interpretation of his behavior recalls the unease and inadequacy she felt around her father, always trying to win his approval but forever failing.

The morning after her dinner with the Commander, she awakes “with a sense of danger and immense helplessness, as though stranded on a fragile scaffolding at the top of a high-rise building, with no visible means of reaching the ground” (163). The possibility of a friendship with the Commander had pulled her out of a very dark hole, had raised her spirits to the top of that “high-rise building,” but now, having lost that hope, she teeters on the “fragile scaffolding,” peering into the abyss once more. She is taken aback by the blanket of snow covering everything outside, but the shock of the sudden change in the weather and the altered landscape merely give “shape to my dislocation”; her disorientation tugs at the fragile thread connecting her to reality (164). She busies herself with her usual rituals – coffee, toast, mindless chores – but then the Commander knocks on her door. Exhilarated by this second chance, she invites him in, but he stays in the doorway. He assures her that he enjoyed dinner, that he thinks she is a nice person and appreciates her humoring his stories, but then he expresses his concern that she might get the wrong impression. He is not ready for a serious relationship, which is clearly what she intended by paying for dinner. He apologizes and is down the hall before she has a chance to respond. His rejection of her is complete; there is no line to pull her back from the edge.

She shuts the door and leans against it, not sure whether to laugh or cry, when “suddenly, on the verge of laughter, I turned to the window and saw in that familiar, frightful way how the world was being drained of its color, how the snow itself was turning into a mass

of dull, sandy sediment that might have been blown in by a desert storm.” Her visual hallucination returns; her tenuous hold on reality breaks: “All at once, I knew I had reached the moment I had been putting off, and felt a great lifting of the spirits to acknowledge that there was no turning back” (165). She resolves to kill herself. She grabs the Exacto knife from the kitchen drawer, as she has planned so many times, and leaves her apartment. Wading through snow up to her hips, she makes her way to a secluded park, finds a bench, clears a place to sit, then, “with one swift, unfaltering motion,” cleaves a foot-long gash in her left arm. But as the blood pours onto the snow, something inside her stirs: “Who had done this to me? Who could have done such a thing? I didn’t want to be dead! I had wanted to kill myself, yes. But I had really only wanted to kill that part of myself which was causing so much pain. Having done that, I had wanted only to recover and get on with living. So it now seemed” (166-167). She tries to stanch the blood pouring from her, but it appears to be too late. As death closes in, she detaches: “In time—in a very short time—a soothing indifference came over me, and I felt myself lifted onto some dim, distant plane where I could split myself off, quite painlessly, from that awful lonely thing I was watching” (167). Like the sinner in the priest’s sermon, the narrator cuts herself free of the corpse she has dragged, the guilt, the pain, the suffering that sent her “raving” (27). Her soul floats above the “awful lonely thing” that imprisoned her.

As that life ends, a new one begins. The narrator survives her suicide attempt and is admitted to the psychiatric ward of the hospital where she is afforded the support she has lacked since her arrival in the States. In addition to the mental health services provided, she finds other patients, many of whom also bear names that suggest a background of

immigration, and this odd group provides a community of people like her, alleviating her alienation and isolation and offering the social support she needs to overcome her illness. After four months on the ward, she signs herself out and returns to reality. While the symptoms of her illness have not completely abated, she is armed with the perspective and courage needed to adjust and heal. In the final paragraph of the novel, it becomes clear that the unnamed narrator, having reached the point of survival, is, herself, writing the text. And so the text ends where it begins: “Living things prefer to go on living” (3, 195). As she notes, “it was this truth that offered itself as a beginning” (195). She writes two beginnings: as she tells the story of the girl thrown from Burma onto the unforgiving shores of America, she simultaneously creates, through the act of writing itself, the place from which the woman who survives begins.

C. Conclusion

Subverting mainstream cultural expectations of the immigrant narrative, *The Coffin Tree* exposes the dark side of immigration, illustrating the complex constellation of factors at each stage of the migration process that progressively increases the immigrant’s vulnerability until her descent into madness is inevitable. As the novel portrays through its extensive treatment of both pre- and post-migration experiences, the lives of immigrants do not begin when they reach the shores of America. The narrator’s and Shan’s pre-migration experiences provide significant stressors that are then compounded by the stressors they encounter post-migration as they struggle to survive in the cold, unwelcoming world of American society. It is through the accumulation of these stressors that they become more and more susceptible to

mental illness until they finally break. By detailing the horror of the characters' experiences as they descend into madness, unaided by the indifferent society that surrounds them, the novel also reveals the catastrophic impact of the isolation experienced by so many immigrants who are debilitated by mental illness and do not know where to turn for help.

III. VULNERABILITY, MENTAL ILLNESS, AND THE IMMIGRANT CHILD: THE EXPERIENCES OF YOLANDA AND SANDRA IN JULIA ALVAREZ'S *HOW THE GARCIA GIRLS LOST THEIR ACCENTS*

It was strange how when held up to the absolute phrase – the one toy I really want [to take to America] – nothing quite filled the hole that was opening wide inside [her]. (Alvarez 215)

A. Background: Time for Deeper Exploration

Julia Alvarez's *How the Garcia Girls Lost Their Accents* reveals the particularly deleterious effects of the immigration process on the fragile psyche of the child. The novel, written in reverse-chronological order beginning twenty-nine years post-migration, recounts the Garcia family's involuntary migration from the Dominican Republic to the United States, retracing their journey through the stages of migration, finally reaching the girls' pre-migration experiences as children in the Dominican Republic. The text is divided into three parts, each containing chapters that present vignettes of the family's experience from the perspective of one or more family members. The family is made up of a mother and father, Mami and Papi, and four sisters, Carla, Sandra (Sandi), Yolanda (Yoyo, Yo, Joe), and Sofia (Fifi), who range from eight to eleven years of age at the time of migration. While the entire family suffers, the two middle children, Sandra and Yolanda, develop diagnosable mental illnesses and are hospitalized as adults post-migration.

Since its publication in 1991, *How the Garcia Girls Lost Their Accents* has received significant critical attention, which can be divided into two categories: those that address

issues of post-colonialism and diaspora and those that focus primarily on issues of cultural identity, specifically the girls' post-migration attempts to form identities that reconcile their Dominican and American selves. While critics have not directly addressed how these issues impact the girls' vulnerability to and development of mental illness, issues of cultural identity are relevant to the discussion of pre-migration factors, such as social vulnerability and cultural connectedness, and post-migration factors, such as culture shock and language acquisition.¹

Ibis Gómez-Vega, in "Hating the Self in the 'Other' or How Yolanda Learns to See Her Own Kind in Julia Alvarez's *How the García Girls Lost Their Accents*," discusses Yolanda's return to Santo Domingo at the age of thirty nine. As Gómez-Vega explains, Yolanda returns to the island in order to "reclaim her Dominican culture and heritage" only to find that "[s]he has become an 'other,' an outsider who has learned to see Dominicans and, by extension, herself through the distorting lens of her foreign upbringing" (85). In their exile, the García family has left their well-defined place as upper-class Dominicans to find themselves, like most immigrants, struggling to survive in New York "at a social level much lower than the one to which they were born in Santo Domingo" (86). Thus, their exile results in both cultural and social displacement, as they face "a world that is hostile to them for no apparent reason" (87), and their "Americanization" requires them to lose both their "accents" as they learn English and their social status as they "learn to accept a less privileged place within the foreign culture in which they must survive" (87). The shift in language and social status requires the loss of one identity and the acquisition of another; it is here that Yolanda gets lost.

¹ Post-colonial and diasporic studies are not relevant to the current analysis, but see Schultermantl; Chandra; and Stefanko, whose works are representative of the available literature.

As Gómez-Vega explains, due to Yolanda's struggle with language in both American and Dominican societies and her inability to identify with the people of either country, she has become an "other" in both contexts, a notion that is illustrated in Yolanda's perception of her cousin "Lucinda [who] 'looks like a Dominican magazine model,' which is presumably a good thing, but Yolanda qualifies the statement by adding that Lucinda's look is a 'look that has always made [her] think of call girls'" (93, citing Alvarez 5). Thus, while Yolanda has returned intending to reclaim her position as an upper-class *dominicana*, she immediately rejects that identity by viewing Lucinda through the lens of the empowered "American woman," distinguishing herself from the very position she has come to "reclaim."

Yolanda's characterization of Lucinda as resembling an American prostitute is also interesting because, as Gómez-Vega points out, Yolanda's issues with identity are directly related to her issues with language, specifically her inability to learn the language of sex and sexuality in either English or Spanish, due to the timing of the family's exile to the United States. Yolanda, at the point in her development when she should be beginning her contemplation of sexuality and forming a sexual identity, is struggling to learn English in the prudish environment of a Catholic school, while also lacking the Spanish resources, such as her cousin Lucinda, she would otherwise have access to had the family remained in the Dominican Republic. Thus, "Yolanda's normal emotional and psychological development is truncated by her immigrant status and her inability to use the English language well during the first few years of her life in the United States" (92). Yolanda's problems in her relationships with American men as she enters adulthood are traced by Gomez-Vega directly to her failure to acquire the language "associated with carnal knowledge, with the kind of sexual experience

that she lacks” (91). Her inability to form a sexual identity in either language illustrates her cultural displacement in both societies.

Yolanda’s identity formation is further hindered by her only partially assimilated American identity, resulting in her rejection by American peers and her inescapable sense of otherness in her new environment, as she is always an outsider “in a cultural milieu where being part of a group is a valuable asset” (93). In her attempts to assimilate, she has lost her Dominican identity but is unable to replace it with an American one, making her “other” in both cultures.

Yolanda’s dual “otherness” is also illustrated, as Gómez-Vega explains, in her interaction with the two *campesinos* who stop to help her change the tire on the car she borrows to drive through the island in her search for *guayabas*, a journey her Dominican relatives discourage her from making: “‘This is not the States,’ Tía Flor says, with a knowing smile. ‘A woman just doesn’t travel alone in this country’” (93, citing Alvarez 9). When the two men approach her to offer help, she responds to them in English, refusing to converse with them as a member of their culture, so they identify her as an American. According to Gómez-Vega,

She is no longer a *dominicana* capable of identifying her own people as ordinary people who are both good and bad, but an “American,” one who has become accustomed to the stereotypical negative images of all people of color dominant in the United States. For Yolanda, Dominicans become the ‘Other’ to be feared, and even a demonstration of concern for her wellbeing provides enough reason to worry about what they may do to her. When the chivalrous *campesinos* persist in their attempts to help Yolanda, she examines them as sexual creatures out on the prowl. (95)

Again, having no solid sexual identity in either language, in either culture, she fears the sexuality of Dominican men and is unable to understand the sexuality of American men; thus, she is dysfunctional in both contexts.

Gómez-Vega's analysis informs the exploration of mental illness in the novel in that it illustrates the profound sense of isolation Yolanda experiences due to her "otherness" in both Dominican and American cultures, which creates social vulnerability and reflects weak cultural connectedness, further increasing her vulnerability to mental illness. Gómez-Vega's analysis also identifies some aspects of the psychological impact of language acquisition, the experience of culture shock, and the drop in socioeconomic status experienced by so many immigrants post-migration. As Gómez-Vega points out, these factors make Yolanda's formation of an American identity problematic. Her inability to forge a new, stable identity post-migration increases Yolanda's vulnerability, and she does, in fact, develop significant psychological issues.

In "A Search for Identity in Julia Alvarez's *How the Garcia Girls Lost Their Accents*," William Luis, writing one year after Gómez-Vega, covers much of the same ground (though he fails to acknowledge as much). He notes that the novel "depicts a search for identity motivated by a tense struggle between Hispanic and North American cultures" (840). He suggests the girls' adoption of an assimilated American identity is incomplete due to the significant drop in the family's socioeconomic status and their experience of racism: "they now experienced life in the United States from a different point of view, not as members of a privileged class associated with the Dominican Republic, but as common Hispanic immigrants" who are "the objects of discrimination both in and outside of school" (841).

Further, in their attempts to assimilate, “the Garcia girls have neglected their Dominican traditions and accepted North American culture” but remain caught “between North American and Hispanic cultures” because they are, and will always be, Dominican-Americans (842). Like Gómez-Vega, Luis discusses the episode at the beginning of the novel when Yolanda returns to the island, where she “finds herself between two worlds; she belongs to both and to neither one of them” (843). Feeling she is not fully a part of American culture she also finds that “[s]he does not recognize nor understand her family’s culture” (843), leaving her identity incomplete in both contexts. In the same manner as Gómez-Vega’s, Luis’s discussion of Yolanda’s problematic formation of a cultural identity is relevant to an examination of the relationship between mental illness and the stages of migration to the extent that it reiterates the effect on the individual’s psychological experience produced by post-migration experiences of cultural difference and an assimilationist strategy of acculturation.

Joan M. Hoffman’s “‘She Wants to be Called Yolanda Now’: Identity, Language and the Third Sister in *How the Garcia Girls Lost Their Accents*” focuses on the role of language in Yolanda’s experience. According to Hoffman, “Words are inseparable from Yolanda’s identity: it is absolutely crucial that she choose the accurate and appropriate word, that she constantly and properly identify, describe, define, redefine, and name everything from mere objects to relationships, even to herself” (23). Hoffman traces Yolanda’s interest in words to her experience of immigration: “‘But in New York, she needed to settle somewhere, and since the natives were unfriendly, and the country inhospitable, she took root in the language’” (23, citing Alvarez 141). Yolanda “takes root” in her second language; she will forge her new identity through the language of her new home. Because she roots herself in language, her

struggles with language reflect the struggles she has reconciling the many parts of her identity, yet language remains the constant in her experience. As Hoffman explains, “In this process of redefining and self-discovery, Yolanda finds that while words may attack, while they may overwhelm at times, they never completely desert her” (25). Ultimately, language is Yolanda’s medium, her tool, as she reconciles her Dominican and American selves.

Hoffman’s discussion of language and its role in Yolanda’s identity formation further underscores the importance of post-migration language acquisition as the immigrant faces the task of acculturation, which may, as in Yolanda’s case, increase her vulnerability to mental illness.

Manuel Matas Llorente, in “And Why Did the Garcia Girls Lose Their Accents? Language, Identity, and the Immigrant Experience in Julia Alvarez’s *How the Garcia Girls Lost Their Accents*,” focuses on the displacement of the Garcia family upon arrival to the States engendered by their experience of culture clash, their drop in socioeconomic status, and the racism they encounter, all of which is further exacerbated by the Garcia girls’ “inability to speak the language properly” (71). In the face of this adversity, “a growing need for a redefinition of identity arises” (72). The product of this redefinition, as Llorente describes, is fragmentation, reflected in the novel’s style and the sisters’ confusion, most pointedly Yolanda’s and Sandra’s nervous breakdowns: “Particularly significant is the personality fragmentation of Yolanda and Sandra, symbolized in their temporary nervous breakdowns, that their mother defines as ‘madness,’ which take a similar form in both of them” (73). Fragmentation, in this instance, “becomes a trope for the girls’ inability to articulate a bicultural, divided self,” illustrated through their loss of the ability to use language to make

meaning, relying instead on the words of others, “as if, by assimilating them, they could make sense of their [own] reality” (73-74). As Llorente explains, to heal, the sisters will have to accept “a divided self, full of inconsistencies and paradoxes, feeling at home nowhere and elsewhere” (74). He suggests that Yolanda, in returning to the island in the episode that begins the novel, has begun to accept that identity, able to view both cultures from a new perspective of both insider and outsider. Llorente’s discussion identifies several aspects of the Garcias’ experience of immigration that are relevant to an analysis of the process of migration and the experience of mental illness. His examination of the relationships between identity, language, and acculturation informs a deeper exploration of the stressors that precipitate the development of mental illness in the immigrant. For Yolanda and Sandra, both of whom are eventually admitted to psychiatric institutions, post-migration experiences of language acquisition and cultural displacement increase their vulnerability to mental illness.

In “Kittens in the Oven: Race Relations, Traumatic Memory, and the Search for Identity in Julia Alvarez’s *How the Garcia Girls lost Their Accents*,” Natalie Carter uses “theoretical concepts drawn from the fields of trauma studies and Black cultural studies...[to examine] Alvarez’s debut novel in order to illustrate the myriad ways in which culture, politics, and race converge and speak through each other, largely in the form of traumas that can irreparably alter one’s sense of home, voice, and identity” (319). Carter applies psychiatrist Judith Herman’s seminal work, *Trauma and Recovery*, a text also employed in the analysis below, which defines trauma as “an affliction of the powerless. At the moment of trauma, the victim is rendered helpless by overwhelming force[...]. Traumatic events overwhelm the ordinary systems of care that give people a sense of control, connection and

meaning” (Herman 33, as cited by Carter 321). Carter uses trauma theory to analyze the experiences of Carlos, the Garcia girls’ father, who is haunted by the Dominican government’s persecution of him and the others involved in the unsuccessful plot to assassinate Trujillo, ultimately concluding that he suffers from post-traumatic stress disorder.

Another facet of Carter’s discussion revolves around the post-migration experiences of the Garcia girls as they attempt to form new identities in a racial context. While an examination of cultural identity is relevant to the exploration of mental illness in the novel, Carter’s analysis is problematic for several reasons, the most significant of which is her inappropriate application of “Black cultural studies.” She mistakenly argues that the concept of “African-Americanization” is

implicitly articulated in *How the Garcia Girls Lost Their Accents*. The title itself is obviously a nod to the girls’ (and Alvarez’s own) attempts, as Afro-Latinas, to negotiate the murky middle-ground of sounding Spanish enough in English so as to not be identified as African-American, but Anglo enough in Spanish so as to not be discriminated against. Thus, when both Carla and Sandi Garcia relate having the racist, xenophobic demand, ‘Go back where you came from, you dirty spic!’ shouted at them (Alvarez 153, 171), it should be understood that this is an experience that is unique to second-generation immigrants like the Garcia girls for two reasons. First, the racist taunts are not prompted by either their accent or their lack thereof, that is, their mastery of the English language is not in question here—rather, the problem is that the girls play too loud for “La Bruja downstairs” (171) or that Carla is identified as having “monkey legs” (153) by the boys tormenting her. The second reason this comment is unique to the particular situation of second-generation immigrants is the reminder that they are not at home in this country, and that “no matter for how long the recipients of such comments have been in the United States, [it] is undergirded by the presumption that Latinos’ real homes and proper places are ‘there’ rather than ‘here’” (Caminero-Santangelo 75). Thus, it becomes clear that the Garcia girls’ sense of identity is inextricably bound to a sense of home, a home that is being denied to them because of their imposed identity with African Americans. (Carter 324)

Carter's assumption that the Garcias are Afro-Latino in a racial sense is unsupported by the text. Despite hailing from the mixed-race society of the Dominican Republic, the Garcias proudly trace their ancestry to the conquistadores (there is an extensive family tree included at the beginning of the text and there is an entire chapter entitled "The Blood of the Conquistadores") and do not claim any African heritage. Further, the taunt, "spic," is a clear reference to "Hispanic," and is not a label applied to one identified as African-American. Carter's assertion that the Garcia girls are "second-generation immigrants" is also incorrect. They were not born in the United States. They were born in the Dominican Republic and moved with their parents to the States as children. That they moved with their parents, one generation older than they, does not make them "second generation immigrants"; they are first generation.

Further, despite Carter's mischaracterization, the racist taunts that the girls experience are, in fact, related to their "accents." In the episode Carter refers to involving Carla, the boys, in addition to the taunts about her "monkey legs," also ridicule her accent when she tells them to stop: "'Eh-stop,' they mimicked her. 'Plees eh-stop'" (153). Further, "La Bruja" does call them (all of them, not just Sandi, who can "pass" as white) "'Spics!'" She is also annoyed by them because "They spoke too loudly and not in English" (170). Thus, Carter's contention that "their mastery of the English language is not in question here" is false. The girls' proficiency in English, and thus their "accents" to which the title of the novel refers, is central to the novel. Carter also relies on Caminero-Santangelo, who discusses "Latinos" who have been in the States for a significant period of time, which, at the point of the novel Carter discusses, the Garcias have not been, and Caminero-Santangelo, at least in the quote Carter

offers, does not suggest that such Latinos possess an African American identity. Ultimately, Carter's claim that the girls have suffered an "imposed identification with African-Americans" does not hold water.

Identity is certainly a pivotal issue in the novel, as several other critics have illustrated, and one that informs a discussion of mental illness, but the question of identity is related to the girls' attempts to assimilate into American society and the conflict they face within themselves as they find their Dominican, not African-American, identities are inescapable and must somehow be reconciled with their American ones. African-American identity, imposed or otherwise, is not relevant to the discussion.

In "The Bicultural Construction of Self in Cisneros, Alvarez, and Santiago," Ellen Mayock discusses Yolanda's use of language in her development of a bicultural identity. She explains that Alvarez "provides a clue early in the narration that helps the reader to map not only the cultural implications of the novel, but also its principal themes," pointing specifically to "the format of the backwards timeline [which] demonstrates the mature protagonist Yolanda's return to her past, implying perhaps a need to recover a distant self or cultural location through memory, nostalgia, and the power of the pen" (224). Further, the title of the novel "immediately suggest[s] past tense and biculturality, two factors that allow us to explore the travels" of Yolanda and her family "from one time to another, from one country to another, and from one self to others" (224). Ultimately, Mayock concludes, Yolanda, in writing her story and describing her struggles with language, is "unraveling the past in order to reconcile it with the present" (224). As identity and culture are intertwined, language reflects Yolanda's personal navigation of her American and Dominican cultures: "In short, the

ever-evolving cultural norms of the narrator-protagonist influence [her] language use,” and Yolanda “never stop[s] observing, reading, speaking, and writing from the border, for [her] language [is] derived from the intersection of [her] two cultures” (227). But her use of language also reflects an inner journey: “Through her writing, Yolanda is slowly coming to terms with difficulties of expression and style and how, despite ‘all that can be said about the world,’ there are still always innumerable barriers to real comprehension between one’s inner world and the outside world one confronts on a daily basis” (227). Ultimately her “desire to weave and create is a salubrious way for [her] to soothe feelings of, as [she] phrases it, ‘shifting from foot to foot’. Although writing does not eliminate the shifting, it does help the writer to define herself through the rich expression of her cultural memories” (228, citing Alvarez 107). Yolanda is a “survivor and inventor, a combination that helps [her] move with more ease between present and past, English and Spanish, desire and reality, and narration and action” (229). Mayock illustrates Yolanda’s use of language, writing, as a tool in her formation and exploration of her identity, in both a cultural and personal context. Like other analyses of language and identity in the novel, Mayock’s examination is useful to the deeper exploration of their influence on the individual immigrant’s vulnerability to mental illness.

In “The Silence of Exile in *How the Garcia Girls Lost Their Accents*,” Ricardo Castells, like many other critics, examines the crucial role of language in the girls’ experiences as they attempt to negotiate between two cultures. Castells takes issue with Hoffman, who he suggests views the girls’ struggles with language as ultimately leading to “the four sisters’ successful assimilation into American life” (34). In Castell’s view, “Rather than forging an assimilated dual identity, as Hoffman believes, the sisters repeatedly find

themselves at odds with their bicultural surroundings, experiencing a form of alienation that is often symbolized by either silence or by an absolute failure to communicate with the other characters” (34). Thus, alienation resulting from the inability to effectively communicate in either language or culture that constitutes the “silence of exile,” hardly a fully successful assimilation

In his analysis, Castells relies on sociologist Ruben G. Rumbaut’s concept of “the so-called 1.5 or one-and-a-half immigrant generation,” which describes “young refugees who were born abroad and raised in the United States, and who therefore find themselves stuck between the first and second generations of American immigrants” (34-35). According to Castells, “Rumbaut writes that the members of the 1.5 generation are in an awkward position because ‘in many ways they are marginal to both the old and new worlds, and are fully part of neither of them’” (35, citing Rumbaut 61). Castells points to the first chapter of the novel, “Antojos,” which describes Yolanda’s experience as an adult when she returns to the Dominican Republic and discovers that she is “as lost in her new country as she is in her old one” (35). In this episode, “Yolanda thus appears to be in a contradictory cultural and linguistic situation” (35), as illustrated in

“Antojos”—a Spanish word that Yolanda does not even understand at first. At this point in her life she is neither successful nor happy in the United States, and she has returned to Santo Domingo because she is trying to find a way to recover her Dominican identity. Unfortunately, her unsuccessful use of the language—and the resulting silence of exile—demonstrates to Yolanda that her native land is no longer her island home. (36)

Castells points to Yolanda’s interaction with the two *compesinos* who stop to help her as revealing that “Yolanda’s dominant cultural identity” is American; however, “this babbling

encounter does not mean that she fully belongs in the United States either, as silence—or the inability to communicate—plagues Yolanda and her family throughout their years in their adopted home” (37).

Castells also discusses the “silence of exile” as symbolic of “the fractured family relationships that have developed after almost thirty years in a foreign country” (37). He points specifically to the relationship between Sofia and their father, Carlos, whose reaction “to the stain on the family’s honor” engendered by Sofia’s accidental pregnancy and subsequent marriage to a German man is complete silence, as he refuses to even mention Sofia’s name for months and, even after reconciliation, barely speaks to her (38). Carlos’s silence is also apparent in his behavior at his seventieth birthday party, when he “withdraws from the rest of the family...as he recognizes that he no longer plays much of a role in his Americanized daughters’ adult lives” (38). Castells argues that Carlos’s silence illustrates that “the Garcia family has barely survived its immersion into English and its difficult transition to American culture.” While the family “has triumphed economically,... their moments of silence reveal that their traditional Hispanic family ties have become worn and frayed” (38).

According to Castells, the “silence of exile” is also illustrated in “the Garcias’ inability to express themselves in a coherent fashion [...] during every family crisis, beginning with the first years of their new lives in the United States” (40). He points specifically to the conflict surrounding Yolanda’s Teacher’s Day address and Carla’s experience with the flasher who follows her home in his car and her inability to adequately describe the man to the police in English. Castells identifies Carla’s inarticulate reaction as “the first example of the Garcia girls’ silence of exile”; however, “whether in English or Spanish, in the United States or in the

Dominican Republic, the four sisters find themselves caught between two languages and two cultures, as one would expect from members of an intermediate generation that has trouble finding its distinct cultural space” (40).

As Castells points out, “the same lack of communication exists in Yolanda’s love life” (38). Castells agrees with Hoffman that “language informs much of Yolanda’s relationships with both her boyfriend and her husband” (38, citing Hoffman 23-25). Relying on Gómez-Vega, Castells explains that “the use and misuse of language explain Yolanda’s and Rudy’s inability to consummate their relationship” (38, citing Gómez-Vega 90). “According to Gómez-Vega, this linguistic confusion forms a pattern in the young woman’s amorous relationships: ‘Yolanda’s sexuality is influenced by her ability or inability to use the English language, and her relationships with men are likewise influenced. When she is involved with a North American male, she simply does not speak the same language he speaks’ (39, citing Gómez-Vega 92). Castells extends this notion to Yolanda’s communicative failures with her husband, John: “by the end of their relationship their only alternative is silence because they no longer understand each other’s speech” (39).

Ultimately, Castells concludes that the Garcia girls’ struggles with language result in their inability to communicate effectively and, frequently, their absolute silence. The struggle with language, then, according to Castells, does not aid the girls’ formation of identities that reconcile two cultures, but rather illustrates the loss of full membership in either, their “silence” exiling them from both cultures. Castells’s analysis, like Gómez-Vega’s, illustrates the intense isolation and thus social vulnerability the girls experience in addition to the

vulnerability engendered by their struggle to acquire English and their experiences of culture shock post-migration.

The existing criticism on *How the Garcia Girls Lost Their Accents* deals with some aspects of the characters' experiences that are relevant to a discussion of mental illness, yet no one has connected the dots, so to speak. Issues of identity, language, and cultural difference inform the analysis of mental illness in the novel, particularly at the post-migration stage, but there are many other factors, at all three stages to consider. It is only by taking all of them together that a true picture of the complex relationship between the Garcia family's immigration from the Dominican Republic to the United States and the mental illness experienced by Yolanda and Sandra emerges.

B. The Stages of Migration: From Sand to Cement

There are three general stages of migration: pre-migration refers to the immigrant's experiences in his/her homeland prior to departure; peri-migration encompasses the immigrant's experiences while in-transit from the homeland to the new land; and post-migration begins when the immigrant arrives at his/her final destination (Loue 59; Perez-Foster 155; Bhugra 244). Each phase carries its own set of experiences and factors that could potentially increase the immigrant's vulnerability to mental illness. In *How the Garcia Girls Lost Their Accents*, the entire family suffers, but the two middle children, Sandra and Yolanda, develop diagnosable mental illnesses that result in their hospitalizations post-migration. The present analysis will address each stage of the family's migration in chronological order from pre- to post-migration, focusing on the relevant factors and

experiences at each stage that influence Yolanda's and Sandra's vulnerability to and ultimate development of mental illness.

1. Pre-migration: Safe Within These Walls

The third part of the novel, which spans the timeframe from 1956 to 1960, covers the Garcias' pre-migration lives. The experiences of Yolanda and Sandra suggest the presence of biological, psychological, and social vulnerability to the development of mental illness post-migration.

- a. Biological Vulnerability

Genetic predisposition is the main biological vulnerability affecting the development of major psychiatric disorders in immigrants (Tseng 697; Veling and Susser 65, 73). While a family history of mental illness is not explicitly described in the novel pre-migration, the fact that both Yolanda and Sandra eventually develop psychotic disorders post-migration is significant. According to Corcoran and Walsh, in families where one sibling develops a psychotic disorder, the probability of another sibling also suffering from such a disorder is eight percent (415), while the lifetime prevalence in the U.S. population is estimated to be just over one percent (417). Dziegielewski and Green calculate the risk of developing a psychotic disorder to be 9.7 times greater for first-degree relatives of one diagnosed than it is for members of the general population (255). Because both Yolanda and Sandra develop psychosis post-migration and the primary etiology of psychotic disorders is genetic predisposition, there is a high probability that the girls are in fact genetically predisposed to

the disorder, and thus have a pre-migration biological vulnerability to the development of mental illness.

b. Psychological Vulnerability

Trauma is the main pre-migration factor increasing an individual's psychological vulnerability to mental illness. Already traumatized individuals become increasingly susceptible to mental illness as they encounter the extreme stress accompanying the migration process (Grinberg and Grinberg 10-12; Perez-Foster 156). Both Yolanda and Sandra have traumatic experiences as children pre-migration that increase their vulnerability to mental illness post-migration.

Yolanda: The Kitten and the Gun

When she is five years old, Yolanda tries to impress their neighbor, "the old general," by telling him that her father owns a gun. Yolanda does not know it at the time, but her father does, in fact, own a gun, which is a violation of Dominican law. When the nursemaid tells on her, Yolanda's parents beat her "with a belt in the bathroom, with the shower on so no one could hear her screams." The punishment, she is told, is for "almost [getting] your father killed" (Alvarez 198). At the age of five, such an experience is sufficient to cause psychological trauma. According to Herman, "psychological trauma is an affliction of the powerless. At the moment of trauma, the victim is rendered helpless by overwhelming force [...]. Traumatic events overwhelm the ordinary systems of care that give people a sense of control, connection, and meaning" (33). A single episode of child abuse is sufficient to

traumatize a child. As Herman explains, “[t]he severity of traumatic events cannot be measured on any single dimension; simplistic efforts to quantify trauma ultimately lead to meaningless comparisons of horror.” There are, however, characteristics common to trauma, such as “being taken by surprise, trapped, or exposed to the point of exhaustion,” and when the episode “include[s] physical violation or injury,” traumatization is more likely. In any event, “the salient characteristic of the traumatic event is its power to inspire helplessness and terror” (34). Yolanda, just five years old, is taken by surprise as she is trapped and beaten by both of her parents, the people she had viewed as her primary source of protection. Her helplessness and terror are easily inferred, and the episode inflicts significant psychological trauma.

While externally Yolanda appears to recover from this incident fairly well, it has both deeply traumatized her and damaged her internal perception of herself in relation to the world. As a child, “a secure sense of connection with caring people is the foundation of personality development. When this connection is shattered, the traumatized person loses her basic sense of self.” Because “the developing child’s positive sense of self depends upon a caretaker’s benign use of power,” when “a parent, who is so much more powerful than a child,” abuses that power by violating or harming the child, it disregards that child’s “individuality and dignity.” The child then feels devalued and disrespected, making her development of self-esteem more difficult (Herman 52). After the incident with the gun, Yolanda begins to suffer from intense anxiety, so intense that her parents take her with them to New York to see a specialist because she “was losing all her hair.” The specialist determines that the problem is “just nerves” (Alvarez 48). She is so affected by the trauma that, four years later, when the

guardias come for her father, she is convinced that they are there because of the tale she told the old general. She thinks for a moment, as one of the men passes his unloaded gun around to the children, that “[m]aybe it is loaded, maybe if she shot her head off, everyone would forgive her for having made up the story of the gun” (199).

At around the same time as the incident with the old general, though it is unclear which event occurred first, Yolanda is traumatized when she wanders into the old, “haunted” coal shed in the back of their yard and steals a kitten from its mother. Pila, the family’s one-eyed Haitian maid who practices voodoo and “brought her story devils and story ghosts and her trances and her being mounted by spirits,” has convinced the children that all the devils and ghosts and spirits in her stories live in the shed (280). Little Yolanda, alone, dares to enter the coal shed and finds a litter of black kittens in one of the barrels that contain “the Devil” (286). She hesitates, but ultimately decides to take one of the kittens for her own, even though she knows it is probably too young to survive without its mother. As she is making her way back to the house, she spots the mother cat and freezes. Earlier, when debating whether to steal one of the kittens, she vaguely remembers a story about a woman being attacked by a mother cat for threatening her kittens, but suddenly, with the mother cat eyeing her suspiciously, the context of the story comes to life: “In that instant the vague memory sharpened. I saw a cat slinking forward. I saw it crouch to spring. I saw it leap and land on a woman’s face. I saw its claws rip out an eye. I saw that jelly spill—and I remembered suddenly with shocking clarity Pila recounting how she had lost her eye” (286-287). Yolanda, now terrified by the very real threat that the mother cat may attack and maim her, runs back to the house, slams the door, and waits while the mother cat prowls in front of the door for

hours. Once the mother disappears, Yolanda “lifted the screen and threw the meowing ball out the window. I heard it land with a thud, saw it moments later, wobbling out from under the shadow of the house, meowing and stumbling forward. There was no sign of the mother cat.” Yolanda returns to the window “about a dozen times that morning and watched the wounded kitten make a broken progress across the lawn. [...] Sometime before lunch [...] I looked out the window of the laundry room. The kitten was gone” (287-288). Little Yolanda has ventured into the devil’s den, stolen a kitten from its mother, broken its leg, and probably caused its death.

The psychological effect of this episode is significant; she begins to have nightmares, waking to “see” the mother cat “sitting at the foot of the bed, poking her face in so that the gauzy net was molded to her features like an awful death mask” (389). She sees the cat “night after night,” plaguing her with nightmares for years until the family moves to the United States. But even as an adult, she is “a woman prone to bad dreams and bad insomnia,” and “there are still times I wake up at three o’clock in the morning and peer into the darkness. At that hour and in that loneliness, I hear her, a black furred thing lurking in the corners of my life, her magenta mouth opening, wailing over some violation that lies at the center of my art” (290). Luis notes, “the mother cat is [...] a symbol of the psychological fear of being taken away from her surroundings at an impressionable age” (848), which is true, but Luis disregards the fact that Yolanda has this nightmare before the family migrates. It represents more than her traumatic departure. All of Yolanda’s pre-migration childhood traumas are crystallized in the mother cat’s terrifying image.

Sandra: The Artist

Pre-migration, Sandra is nothing more than “an anonymous de la Torre child [...] born to die one of the innumerable, handsome de la Torre girls.” Nothing distinguishes her; nothing makes her special. Nothing, until she is eight years old and it is discovered that her “small, anonymous hand” could create beautiful works of art: “‘Gifted’ descended upon my hitherto unremarkable shoulders like a coat of many colors” (Alvarez 241). But, once discovered, her talent becomes uncanny, both in the likeness of her drawings to her subjects and in the supernatural power the household attributes to her gift. Being thrust into the spotlight in such a manner makes Sandra anxious, and the experiences that follow ultimately leave her severely traumatized and forever changed.

When she creates a drawing of the nursemaid Milagros’s son, he becomes ill, and Milagros is convinced that Sandi’s drawing has possessed him: “‘Please, please, Señorita Sandi, you must release him,’ Milagros pleaded, taking my drawing off the wall where she’d hung it beside a crucifix” (242). Sandi takes the drawing, crumples it up, and throws it in the fire. The baby looks at her “with glazed spirit eyes” and by the next morning is cured (242). The supernatural power of her gift is further affirmed when Sandi draws on the compound walls, is “fed punishment supper,” and “sent to bed early to contemplate my bad character.” That night, “the pantry and supply closet were overrun with rats.” Seeing the event as an omen, “the family decided they had to get me trained in art” (242).

Sandi and all her fourteen female cousins (“the great female democracy of our blue blood dictated that all the de la Torre girls be given equal decorative skills”) are taken to Doña Charito’s for art lessons. Doña Charito is married to Don José, the famed artist who had been

commissioned several years earlier to create sculptures for the new National Cathedral, but no one had seen or heard from him since. The rumor is that Don José was driven mad by his inability to finish the enormous undertaking. Doña Charito proves to be a strict teacher, and Sandi grows impatient, afraid that “I would never get to draw the brilliant and lush and wild world brimming over inside me.” As she attempts to pay attention, she grows increasingly restless as “something began to paw the inside of my drawing arm. It clawed at the doors of my will, and I had to let it out.” She gives in, grabs her brush, “and a cat streaked out on my paper in one lightning stroke, whiskers, tail, meow and all! I breathed a little easier, having gained a cat-sized space inside myself” (247). But Doña Charito is not pleased with Sandi’s work, not because the work lacks merit (she does not even look at Sandi’s creation) but because Sandi has failed to follow her directions. She drags Sandi from the room and sticks her in a dark parlor, alone, then slams the door. Sandi is frustrated: “It seemed like everything I enjoyed in the world was turning out to be wrong” (248).

It is interesting that Sandi gets in trouble for painting a picture of a cat, which is a symbol of Yolanda’s traumatization – the image foreshadows the trauma Sandi is about to experience when she defies Doña Charito’s instructions to stay put and ventures out to the back of the house. She hears “a man’s voice, shouting and crying curses [...]. Normally, I would have run in the opposite direction, but the curses he was yelling were the ones I was muttering under my breath,” so “I was drawn to investigate” (248-249). In the muddy, cluttered backyard, she finds “an unpainted shed with one high window and one door clamped shut with a great padlock.” The man’s curses had come from inside along with a “tap-tap-tapping” which peaked her curiosity. She drags an old tree stump under the window, climbs

up, and peers inside. Initially, “I could see only my own face reflected back,” but then she makes out “giant, half-formed creatures coming out of logs [...]. Some logs had hoofs or claws, tails or horns; some had the beginnings of a face, a mouth, or an eye; some had hands with fingernails” (249). Seeing these grotesque, misshapen creatures is terrifying. Then she sees the artist:

He was the same shiny mahogany color as his half-formed creatures. Around his neck was a halter, trailing a chain to an iron ring by the door.—And that was all he wore! He was a tiny man, my size standing on a log, perfectly proportioned, except for one thing. I had seen the stud bulls on my grandfather’s ranch during the breeding season and witnessed their spectacles among the cows [...].The little man grew big like those bulls on the ranch [...]. (250)

As Sandi screams, the man suddenly stops his work, looking for the source. He “bull’s-eyed on my face against the window, then lunged in my direction. His chain grew taut. But before he could reach the window, open it up, and yank me inside, I threw myself off my perch and landed hard on the ground.” She breaks her arm, but is “too terrified to feel pain.” He continues to watch her from the window, “an inane grin spread across his lips like a stain.” He taps on the glass to hold her attention, but “there was no need for that; my eyes were riveted to his face, and my mouth opened in a voiceless scream. At last, sound came to my terror. I screamed and screamed even after his face had disappeared from the window” (250-251).

Doña Charito and all of the cousins come running from the house to find Sandi, “my face smeared with tears, my body soiled with mud like a creature’s, [...] small wet sobs coming out of my mouth” (251). Sandi wears a cast for months, but when it is removed, they discover that her arm has healed crookedly and will have to be re-broken and reset. The family treats this as a major operation, and Sandi is “sure that I was about to die and that’s

why everyone was being so kind to me” (253). She survives but has to wear her arm in a sling on-and-off for a year, and she never draws again. The traumatic episode leaves its mark on her psyche: “My cast was off. But I was a changed child. Months of pampering and the ridicule of my cousins had turned me inward. But now when the world filled me, I could no longer draw it out. I was sullen and dependent on my mother’s sole attention, tender-hearted, and whiney: the classic temperament of the artist but without anything to show for my bad character. I could no longer draw. My hand had lost its art” (254).

Sandi’s traumatic encounter with Don José has robbed her of the ability to express herself. As an eight-year-old budding artist, she is confronted with the shocking, grotesque, and terrifying image of an artistic genius, a person whose success she would have aspired to, whose life and work would have served as a model for her own. Seeing him transformed into an animal, a terrifying creature, a madman, by his gift, the same uncanny gift bestowed upon Sandi – who shouts and cries the same curses as he, who sees her own reflection in his window, who is the same size as he, who ends up covered in mud “like a creature” – makes her fear for her life, for what she could become. She is left mute, the world filling her with no release but her “silent scream.” The profound psychological effect of Sandi’s encounter with Don José is reflected in the path of her descent into schizophrenia as a young adult post-migration when, unable to draw out the world piling up within her, frustrated by her inability to express, to create, like Don José breaking under the weight of the monumental project that he struggles to complete, she is driven mad. She becomes convinced that, like Don José, she is turning into an animal, becoming less and less human, until she devolves completely, making animal noises and believing she is becoming a monkey.

c. Social Vulnerability

Yolanda and Sandra are also rendered more vulnerable to mental illness through their pre-migration social experiences, particularly those creating feelings of alienation and isolation. According to Veling and Susser, “adverse social experiences may create an enduring cognitive vulnerability, which is characterized by negative schematic models of the self and the world, for example, beliefs about the self as vulnerable to threat or about others as dangerous.” Negative social experiences at the pre-migration stage create a “vulnerability [that] has been associated with depression, and may lead to paranoid ideations and, in extreme forms, to persecutory delusions in those genetically at risk for psychosis [...]. Such factors are likely to contribute to the increased rates of psychotic disorders among immigrants” (68).

Wicks et al., in their report on the association between childhood adversity and the risk of developing major psychiatric disorders later in life, note that these “social factors [...] all represent a situation of exclusion [...] the adverse/excluding situations that influence the risk of developing schizophrenia and other psychoses” (as cited by Veling and Susser 69). When the individual experiences alienation or isolation in his/her home environment, he/she will be more sensitive to those feelings post-migration and may have difficulties becoming rooted in the new society. According to Grinberg and Grinberg, the individual needs to have a “feeling of belonging” in his/her pre-migration environment because “the possibility of developing a feeling of belonging [is] a requisite for becoming integrated into a new country and also for maintaining one’s sense of identity” (23). Those whose alienation or isolation pre-migration is “especially intense will find that their problems become exacerbated during migration because the migratory experience accentuates for a time the feeling of not

belonging. One ceases to belong to the world one left behind and does not yet belong to the world in which one has newly arrived” (23). On a social level, if the individual is already an outsider, he/she is less likely to feel at home in the new society.

Because of their ages and gender, the girls are, for the most part, relegated to the family compound where they are surrounded by their large extended family, an insular community that constitutes its own sort of mini-society. But the girls’ isolation is also for their own safety; the family faces intense scrutiny because of their opposition to the Trujillo government as well as their socioeconomic status and cultural position that date back to the conquistadores. In this sense, marginalized from the larger society, the family has a dwindling “feeling of belonging” within the Dominican Republic, and their ties to the country, once fundamental to its social and cultural fabric, are disintegrating. Because of the family’s circumstances, the girls are denied any meaningful social experience in an environment that extends beyond the family unit, making them more vulnerable post-migration to the stress of confronting and learning to function within a much larger and loosely connected society in the United States.

In addition to the family’s collective alienation and isolation, the problematic social experiences Yolanda and Sandra have within the limited social sphere of the compound increase their vulnerability to mental illness post-migration. Yolanda is considered to be a little too “wild,” a tomboy whose best friend is a male cousin, making her stick out in an environment where the girls are largely viewed as a group and are expected to respect the established gender roles. Feeling herself to be different from the other girls in the compound predisposes Yolanda to feelings of alienation post-migration when she will discover that she

is also different from the other girls in her American schools. Sandra, on the other hand, allows herself to be absorbed into the throng of female cousins, but this, too, is problematic. While she “belongs” in this insular society, she also never develops autonomy, and so, when she is forced to venture out into American society post-migration without the protection of her fourteen or so cousins who would accompany her in the Dominican Republic, she will experience intense stress. To further add to her stress, the overwhelmingly negative experience she has the one time she is singled out as an individual, when her artistic gift is discovered, will make her even more anxious in her new and threatening environment post-migration.

d. Cultural Connectedness

Cultural identity, which in some cases is tied to the individual’s social vulnerability, is another pre-migration factor that is evident in *How the Garcia Girls Lost Their Accents*. According to Tseng, “the attitudes of immigrants regarding their own culture often has [sic] a significant impact on the results of migration” (703). When immigrants have developed “a strong cultural identity, [...] a high degree of pride in their own culture, and are biased toward the cultures of others,” they may resist the acculturation process, which, depending on the presence of other post-migration factors, may be problematic from a mental health perspective (703). At the other extreme, those who do not have a strong cultural identity or do not respect the values of their own cultures “tend to assimilate themselves into the host society readily when they migrate.” But this, too, can be problematic, particularly if the individual is unable

to adapt quickly enough or is not well-received by the host culture and becomes alienated and isolated (703).

Yolanda's and Sandra's pre-migration cultural identities are problematic for several reasons. Because the girls are isolated within the family compound and do not engage in the larger society due to the hostile political environment, their sense of culture is based entirely on their experiences within their extended family. For this reason, the boundary between culture and family is blurred, and the girls' Dominican identities are defined solely by their family relationships. When transplanted into American culture, which, unlike their Dominican roots, extends far beyond the family unit, the girls' only point of reference to contrast the two cultures becomes their nuclear family. In this context, their experience with American culture becomes their only significant experience in any culture on a wider societal level. It is their only experience with a society that is made up of people who are not members of and do not share the same values as their extended family.

Not finding a community of other immigrants from the Dominican Republic further complicates their cultural identities. With the family unit as the only source of Dominican culture, when relationships within that family break down as the children begin to outpace their parents in their acculturation, the result is cultural confusion, a complete loss of culture, both old and new. The girls' cultural identities are further complicated by their ages at the time of migration. Yolanda is nine and Sandra is ten years old, ages at which children are still in the early stages of identity formation. Thus, they have not yet formed a strong sense of pride in or connection to their home culture, unlike their parents, who because of their ages are more rooted in their home culture and resist acculturation. As a result, the girls adopt a

more assimilationist strategy in their acculturation; however, because they are unable to adapt quickly enough, they experience intense alienation.

e. Involuntary Departure

The Garcias are forced to flee the island fearing for their lives and face a set of circumstances that frequently results in trauma. As Perez-Foster notes, “the most recent studies [...] have provided a devastating picture of [...] the chaos that individuals and families withstand when migration is determined by threats to their livelihood and daily safety.” Combined with the stress already inherent to migration, “[these] factors can move people toward extreme levels of distress and decompensation” (157). Tseng also describes the potential trauma accompanying an involuntary departure: “in many cases, [involuntary migrants] have encountered killing, robbing, rape, death, and other serious situations that may lead to psychological trauma” (711). Under Trujillo’s government, the Garcias, as members of the privileged upper-class, live in constant fear, learning “the national language of a police state: every word, every gesture, a possible mine field, watch what you say, look where you go” (Alvarez 210-211). Many of the Garcias’ family members and friends have been arrested and tortured or simply “disappeared,” and there is every reason to believe that Papi could suffer the same fate because of his involvement in a failed plot to assassinate Trujillo. Yet while the possibility that the Garcias may have to flee the island is always there, their actual departure is extremely sudden, unexpected, and traumatic.

The Garcias’ departure is precipitated by an unexpected visit from two plain-clothes *guardias* who come looking for Papi to question or possibly arrest him for his involvement in

the assassination plot. Papi sees them walking up the driveway and retreats to a small, hidden room in the back of his and Mami's bedroom closet. He hides there for hours as the men interrogate Mami about his whereabouts and she plays hostess, serving them snacks and beer while avoiding their questions by having Yolanda recite for them and trying to coax Fifi to smile.

Finally, Tio Vic, the CIA agent who had helped organize the plot against Trujillo, comes to their rescue. He diffuses the situation, delivering the news, both to the plain-clothes officers and the family, who have heard nothing of their departure, that "the doctor has been granted a fellowship at a hospital in the United States, and he, Victor, has just heard the family's papers have received clearance from the head of Immigration. So, why would the good doctor get into any trouble" (211-212). The girls are shocked; as the men leave, "Sandi stayed on the couch sitting on her hands. Fifi and Yoyo clustered around Mami, balling up her skirt [...], Fifi wailing every time the big fat guard bent down for a goodbye kiss from her" (214).

Once the men are gone, the family frantically prepares to leave that very night. They are involuntary migrants, and as Tseng notes, in addition to the fear precipitating the departure and the trauma resulting therefrom, "the typically abrupt nature of involuntary migration forecloses any careful preparation" and "the number of material assets that can be moved is limited" (701). Mami "had everyone in motion: the girls were to go to their bedrooms and make a stack of their best clothes and pick one toy they wanted to take on this trip to the United States" (Alvarez 215). They can take only what they can carry.

The girls are stunned. They go from playing with their cousins like they do on any other day to suddenly leaving home forever. Afraid, “Sandi followed her sisters into their side-by-side bedrooms. They stood in a scared little huddle, feeling strangely careful with each other” (215). The girls’ fear and confusion are heightened by the old Haitian maid Chucha, who comes in their room to cast a protective voodoo spell on them before they leave. The experience is so intense that even little Fifi, who later claims she remembers nothing else about their departure, is haunted by the scene. Chucha tells them in a voice of foreboding, ““You are going to a strange land [...].When I was a girl, I left my country too and never went back.”” Chucha places a strange wooden statue with a cup of water on its head on Carla’s vanity. As the statue begins to cry, “Chucha held each of our heads in her hands and wailed a prayer over us. We were used to some of this strange stuff from daily contact with her, but maybe it was because today we could feel an ending in the air, anyhow, we all started to cry as if Chucha had finally released her own tears in each of us” (221).

That night, the family leaves as “the girls all cried, especially the little one, clutching onto [Chucha’s] skirts, Doña Laura weeping so hard into her handkerchief that [Chucha] insisted on going back to her bureau and getting her a fresh one” (221-222). The suddenness of the family’s departure and the fear surrounding it is psychologically devastating. As Harlem notes, involuntary immigrants are typically denied “the protective rite of farewell” (462). For them, “the connection with the home society is completely disrupted, and the outcome of the migration, in terms of the duration of living in a foreign place, and the final solution regarding the move are uncertain” (Tseng 700). In the dark of night, as their cousins sleep soundly in their beds, Mami and the girls leave with Victor, and Papi waits before

creeping out of the house dressed in black, driving separately to protect them should he be captured.

2. Post-migration: A Gaping Hole

During the post-migration phase, the psychological experience of immigrants depends largely upon the environment they face and their ability to adapt. Because the girls are children when the family arrives in the States, the experiences of the family as a whole are relevant to the examination of their vulnerability to mental illness. As Tseng notes, “in the process of migration, the family as a group reacts to the process of transcultural adjustment” because, “when problems or stress are encountered either from inside or outside the family, all family members are affected as a system and react together toward the stress, seeking a solution” (707). Post-migration, the adverse experiences of the family as a unit, in addition to their own experiences as individuals, increase Yolanda’s and Sandra’s vulnerability to mental illness. The relevant factors at this stage are a) language difficulties, b) low socioeconomic status, c) culture shock, and d) the absence of adequate social support.

a. Language Proficiency

As the title of the novel suggests, issues of language are central in *How the Garcia Girls Lost Their Accents*. The family does have some exposure to English before immigrating; Mami and Papi both attended schools in the States, and the girls have learned some English in school and at home, as illustrated by Yolanda’s recitation of Poe’s “Annabel Lee” to a bus full of passengers when she travels to New York with her parents as a young child. Nonetheless,

the girls' early struggle to acquire the language slows their adjustment and increases their alienation and isolation. As Llorente rightly notes, "in this first stage of relocation, the Garcia girls' sense of displacement arises from their inability to speak the language properly" (71). In the mental health literature, "it is a general rule that fluency in the language of the host society will facilitate the process of cultural adjustment," while "if there is a handicap in learning the new language, there will certainly be difficulties in acculturation" (Tseng 699). Further, the level of proficiency in "the language of the recipient society will influence adjustment and distress" (Bhugra 245), and several case studies have used poor English language proficiency as a measure of social alienation (Furnham and Bochner 97). Perez-Foster also notes that "preoccup[at]ions with the obstacles of a new language they can barely speak" aggravates many immigrants' experience "as the beleaguered 'other,'" adding stress and further increasing their vulnerability (155). For the Garcia girls, as Hoffman points out, "the struggle to master a second language is a constant reminder to the girls of their weakened position as strangers in a new land" (22).

Yolanda's first experience in an American school illustrates the alienation the girls experience as they begin to learn English: "As the only immigrant in my class, I was put in a special seat in the first row by the window, apart from the other children so that Sister Zoe could tutor me without disturbing them. [...] Slowly, she enunciated the new words I was to repeat: *laundromat, corn flakes, subway, snow*" (Alvarez 166, orig. italics). While the girls struggle to learn even the basic vocabulary needed to function in society on a day-to-day basis, they are also unable to acquire the language necessary to understand the physical and psychological changes they are experiencing as they enter puberty. Because the girls are on

the cusp of puberty when they immigrate, they enter puberty within the first three to four years post-migration, and thus “the joys and struggles of language is [sic] simultaneous with [their] sexual awakening” (Hoffman 23). They enter puberty before they are fully fluent in English and before they have formed friendships with other girls their ages who, like the cousins back home, could help them figure things out (Gómez -Vega 92): “They had come to this country before [Yolanda] had reached puberty in Spanish, so a lot of the key words she would have been picking up in the last year, she had missed. Now, she was learning English in a Catholic classroom, where no nun had ever mentioned the words she was needing” (Alvarez 163). Ultimately, as Gómez -Vega explains, the girls’ “normal emotional and psychological development is truncated by [their] immigrant status and [their] inability to use the English language well during the first few years of [their] [lives] in America” (Gómez -Vega 92).

Despite their initial difficulties, the girls become fluent and comfortable with the language by their fifth year post-migration. Early in the process, Yolanda chooses to focus on language as the measure of her adjustment. On the Island, she had been a “terrible student,” but “in New York, she needed to settle somewhere, and since the natives were unfriendly, and the country inhospitable, she took root in the language” (Alvarez 141). She begins writing “secret poems in her new language” and labors over her writing assignments for school (136). She becomes a star student and is asked to give the Teacher’s Day address in ninth grade. She is confident in her abilities as a writer but terrified by the prospect of giving this address: “She still had a slight accent, and she did not like to speak in public, subjecting herself to her classmates’ ridicule” (141). She procrastinates for days. The weekend before the speech, she

sits down and reads Whitman's "Song of Myself": "I celebrate myself and sing myself. [...] He most honors my style who learns under it to destroy the teacher" (142, citing Whitman). Yolanda is electrified: "The poet's words shocked and thrilled her. She had gotten used to the nuns, a literature of appropriated sentiments, poems with a message, expurgated texts. But here was a flesh and blood man, belching and laughing and sweating in poems." She plagiarizes, taking his words as her own, his English, real English infused with feeling, meaning: "She finally sounded like herself in English!" (143). While she believes she has found her voice in English, the voice is not her own. Her mastery of the language and the successful adjustment she imputes to it are false. As Gómez -Vega notes, "her knowledge of English is good enough to let her make good grades in her classes, but she cannot really understand the language when it is used with hidden shades of meaning" (91). Even as an adult, when she is admitted to the hospital frantically quoting line after line of the works of great writers, she is still speaking through others; she has not found her voice in English.

b. Socioeconomic Status

Low socioeconomic status post-migration significantly increases the stress and sense of alienation associated with the adjustment process and can further increase the individual's vulnerability to mental illness (see Veling and Susser 69, Furnhman and Bochner 97, Loue 62, Perez-Foster 156). While the Garcias do not live in the abject poverty many other immigrants and refugees face, the drop in socioeconomic status they experience post-migration is sufficient for the psychological impact to still be significant.

Their first home is a small, dirty apartment in New York City, a stark contrast to the lush and expansive grounds of their family compound in the Dominican Republic. Papito, Mami's father, pays their rent because the money Papi earns on his fellowship is meager. Mami frequently tells the girls that "without Papito [...] we would have to go on welfare," and the girls realize that welfare "was what people in this country got so they wouldn't turn into beggars like those outside La Catedral back home" (Alvarez 174). In other words, in this country, without their grandfather's help, they would be as low on the socioeconomic ladder as the poorest of the poor on the Island where, as Llorente comments, they once lived in "a world of privileges and isolation from external poverty" (71). They have gone from one extreme to the other. Sandi is so affected by the severity of the situation that she thinks that if things get bad enough, "she would sell her charm bracelet with the windmill [...]. She would even cut her hair and sell it—a maid back home had told her that girls with good hair could always do that [...]. But Sandi would make the needed sacrifices" (Alvarez 173). She even fantasizes about being adopted by a rich American family, who would "give her an allowance like other American girls got, which Sandi would then pass on to her real family" (173).

The extent of the family's drop in status is revealed when they go to dinner with the Fannings. When the family takes a taxi to the restaurant, instead of the bus, it is a special treat, in contrast to their life on the Island, "where there had always been a chauffeur opening a car door" for them. In the taxi, "Sandi realized with a pang one of the things that had been missing in the last few months. It was precisely this kind of special attention paid to them [when they still lived on the Island]" – their servants and nursemaids always "act[ed] as if the health and well-being of the de la Torre-Garcia children were of wide public concern" (174).

Here, in the midst of her description of their privileged upbringing, Sandi refers to the girls as the “de la Torre-Garcia children,” an identification that inverts the name used in the Dominican Republic, “Garcia de la Torre.” The inversion reflects the family’s early adoption of American cultural norms that privilege the name of the father, but it also reiterates the family’s drop in socioeconomic status. On the island, the de la Torre name reflects a higher social and cultural place than Garcia, and thus instills a certain sense of pride that is denied them in the States. Mami, too, “needed that acknowledgement. It had come to her automatically in the old country from being a de la Torre. ‘Garcia de la Torre,’ Laura would enunciate carefully, giving her maiden as well as married name when they first arrived. But the blank smiles had never heard of her name” (139). As Luis notes, “they now experienced life in the United States from a different point of view, not as members of a privileged class associated with the Dominican Republic, but as common Hispanic immigrants” (841). In the States, no one knows and no one cares who they are.

At the restaurant, Mami notes that the restaurant is so expensive that the prices are not listed on the menu. Papi is humiliated because he cannot afford to pay for dinner, so the Fannings pick up the tab: “Back in the old country, everyone fought for the honor of paying. But what could he do in this new country” (Alvarez 176). When Sandi accompanies her father and Mrs. Fanning to the restrooms and Mrs. Fanning makes a pass at Papi, Sandi notices that “around American women he was not himself. He rounded his shoulders and was stiffly well-mannered, like a servant” (180). Mrs. Fanning tries to kiss him, and there is nothing he can do about it. He exhorts Sandi to keep the exchange a secret; disclosure would risk their “one chance in this country” because they are indebted to Dr. Fanning for getting Papi the

fellowship (182). The night with the Fannings cements for Sandi the family's new, subordinate status: "Tonight she felt beyond either of her parents: she could tell that they were small people compared to these Fannings" (184). In America, her parents are nothing. The Fannings, people like the Fannings, are the ones in control; they are the important ones, the people who everyone caters to in the same way everyone fussed over the de la Torre children on the Island. The significance of the family's loss of status and privilege suddenly crystallizes, and she realizes just how far they have to climb to regain a life like the one they left behind.

The Garcias' loss of socioeconomic status is further underlined by their living conditions, first in the small apartment in New York and then in a succession of rental houses. Their new environment is nothing like "the lush grasses and thick-limbed, vine-laden trees around the compound back home" (151). While Papi eventually becomes a U.S. citizen and decides that the family is here to stay, the girls still "didn't feel we had the best the United States had to offer. We had only second-hand stuff, rental houses in one red-neck Catholic neighborhood after another, clothes at Round Robin, a black and white TV afflicted with wavy lines" (107). As Gómez -Vega notes, "they must lower their expectations" as they "begin their immigrant lives at a social level much lower than the one to which they were born in Santo Domingo" (86).

Their situation changes once Papi becomes licensed as a medical doctor and starts "making real money in his office up in the Bronx" (Alvarez 109). At this point, approximately six years post-migration, the family climbs into the upper-middle class; they are wealthy enough to send the girls to boarding school in Boston where they can "meet and mix with the

'right kind' of Americans, ... the cream of the American crop, the Hoover girl and the Hanes twins and the Scott girls and the Reese kid" (108). If the American Dream is one of financial success, the Garcias finally achieve it, but the girls are changed by their early experiences in the lower echelon of American society.

c. Culture Shock

Culture shock is "precipitated by the anxiety that results from losing all our familiar signs and symbols of social intercourse" (Oberg, as cited by Furnham and Bochner 48). The concept of culture shock has been adopted by the mental health disciplines to describe the "primarily emotional reaction that follows from not being able to understand, control, and predict the behavior" of members of the host society (Furnham and Bochner 49). Culture shock is a response to a "lack of familiarity with both the physical setting [...] as well as the social environment" (49), and the intensity of the individual's experience of culture shock depends on the degree of difference between the home and new cultures (Bhugra 246). In situations where the cultural differences are extreme, it may be several years before the individual is able to adapt well enough to function in the new culture, and the intensity and duration of the individual's experience of culture shock and the accompanying alienation may further increase his/her vulnerability to mental illness (Bhugra 246).

The chapter "Floor Show" gives an account from Sandi's perspective of the family's dinner with the Fannings. As discussed above, the episode illustrates the family's drop in socioeconomic status, but it is also the first post-migration experience detailed in the text that reveals the contrast in the cultural norms of Dominican and American societies, as well as

American society's perception of "Spanish" cultures and the cultural subordination immigrants are forced to accept in order to be successful in their new environment. And for Sandi, the experience offers a more pointed examination of how the role of the privileged American woman differs from that of the privileged women on the Island such as her mother and aunts. The episode also allows Sandi to view herself through the lens of American culture; her value, she learns, is in her ability to enact the idealized image of the beautiful and exotic "Spanish" woman.

When the Garcias arrive at the Spanish restaurant, they find a stereotyped, exaggerated fantasy of "Spanish" culture; the doorman is "dressed up like a dignitary" and the "handsome waiters" wear "their black hair slicked back into bullfighters' little ponytails" and "cummerbunds and white shirts with ruffles on the chest" (Alvarez 175). When the waiter arrives to take their drink orders, Fifi disregards the rules set out by Mami and orders a Coke. Mami shoots her a look and Fifi changes her order to chocolate milk, but Papi, now embarrassed, "laughed good-naturedly, aware of the waiting waiter," and says "'Coke is fine for tonight'" (176). The scene only becomes more awkward for the family as Papi tries to win over the staff: "When the drinks arrived, Papi made a funny toast, in Spanish and loud enough for the waiters' benefit, but they were all too professional, and if they did overhear, no one chuckled" (177). At an upscale restaurant in New York, wealthy Americans like the Fannings would never acknowledge, much less try to relate to, the staff. Papi's attempt to entertain the staff reveals his ignorance of American cultural norms, and the staff's refusal to join Papi in his transgression of these norms sets the Garcias' in a cultural place below even them.

While the Garcias are punctual and would be mortified if they had left the Fannings waiting, the Fannings are running late. When the Americans finally arrive, the girls are unsure “what manners were called for” (177), while the Fannings, at ease in this environment, model behavior that, while pushing the boundaries of what is acceptable, serves as an example of the condescending and self-absorbed nature of members of their class. Mrs. Fanning becomes intoxicated, and while Dr. Fanning grows irritated by her increasingly obnoxious behavior, he fails to stop her, and no one but the Garcias seems to be uncomfortable with her display.

When Sandi needs to use the restroom, Papi offers to accompany her. As Papi stands, Mrs. Fanning also decides to use the restroom, and the three of them leave the table. In front of the bathrooms, Mrs. Fanning makes a sexually suggestive remark to Papi; he says nothing, instead looking down at his feet, embarrassed. Sandi opens the door to the women’s restroom, and “as Mrs. Fanning turned to follow, she turned toward Sandi’s father and brushed her lips on his.” Like Papi, Sandi “looked down at her feet, and waited for the giggling lady to sweep by her” (181). An act of this sort would be immediately rebuked in the Dominican Republic; women simply do not act that way, and men certainly do not stand there, silently accepting it. When Sandi exits the restroom ahead of Mrs. Fanning, her father pulls her aside and exhorts her to keep this a secret: ““That woman is drunk...But I can’t insult her, imagine, our one chance in this country”” (182). Because here, in America, the Garcias’ cultural status is beneath the Fannings’ and they are indebted to Dr. Fanning for enabling them to escape the Island, Papi has no choice but to accept the woman’s treatment of him; it is not his place to question her.

When they return to the table, Sandi “studied the Fannings intently for clues as to their mysterious behavior.” Earlier, she had surmised that “this plain, bucktoothed woman” must be “from a good family” who “came with all the jewelry she had on” to have married the doctor and belong to the upper-class. Her husband also appears to have very little control over her behavior, as they squabble over his attempts to curb her drinking. Sandi begins to realize that, in this culture, women can behave as they please, provided they have enough money. She also realizes that her parents, members of the highest class and possessing the highest cultural position on the Island, are “small people compared to these Fannings” (184).

As the night progresses, the “floor show” begins: “Six señoritas in long, fitted dresses with flaring skirts and castanets in their hands flounced onto the stage....Beautiful men in toreador outfits joined their ladies” (184). Sandi is mesmerized by the dance: “Sandi’s heart soared. This wild and beautiful dance came from people like her, Spanish people, who danced the strange, disquieting joy that sometimes made Sandi squeeze Fifi’s hand hard until she cried or bullfight Yoyo with a towel until both girls fell in a giggling heap on the floor” (185). Midway through the performance, Mrs. Fanning “scrambled up onto the platform, clapping her hands over her head, Dr. Fanning lunging at but missing her as she escaped onto center stage. The dancers good-naturedly made way. Dr. Fanning did not follow, but with an angry shrug of his shoulders, headed back to their table” (186). Dr. Fanning half-heartedly tries to stop his wife but quickly relents.

On the Island, a woman would never dare act in such a way and a man would never allow it. But in the States, Sandi is learning, men do not possess such control, and women like Mrs. Fanning can do as they please. The dancers accommodate her, and “the restaurant came

alive with the American lady's clowning. She was a good ham, bumping her hips up against the male dancers and rolling her eyes. The diners laughed and clapped. [...] One of the male dancers partnered Mrs. Fanning—who advanced as the dancer withdrew in a pantomime of a cartoon chase. The diners roared their approval” (186). Mrs. Fanning mocks the dancers, turning their exhibit of a high Spanish cultural art form into a farce, and her comedic interpretation of their performance is met with approval from the entire restaurant, including Sandi's parents: “To a round of applause, Mrs. Fanning was escorted back to the table by her partner. Sandi's father stood up and pulled her chair out for her.... The table was presented with a complimentary bottle of champagne from the management.” Mrs. Fanning's interruption is disrespectful, but the other Americans are not offended, revealing a collective lack of respect for Spanish culture. Mami and Papi do not express contempt for this display but rather encourage it. Mami reassures Dr. Fanning, ““Let her enjoy herself.... She is just having a good time,”” and Papi welcomes her back to the table with open arms (186).

Mrs. Fanning holds up her glass to her admirers: ““A toast to all of us!”” Her toast, “to all of us,” refers to the entire group of wealthy American diners and, by extension, the members of their class, who share her perception of Spanish culture as just another piece of entertainment. Dr. Fanning follows with his own toast, which inadvertently cements the message: “Dr. Fanning held up his glass and tried to inject a pointed seriousness into the moment: ‘To you, the Garcias. Welcome to this country.’” Their “welcome” is a scene that reveals the place their culture occupies in American society. It is a source of amusement, lacking any value beyond a beautiful fantasy to indulge. Mami and Papi willingly, even enthusiastically, accept this subordination: “Now her parents lifted their glasses, and in her

father's eyes, Sandi noted gratitude and in her mother's eyes a moistness that meant barely checked tears" (187). To succeed in this environment, the Garcias must willingly disconnect from their culture. As the Puerto Rican super tells them, "It is a difficult place, this country, before you get used to it. You have to not take things personal" (170).

For her part, Sandi is disgusted by the entire episode, but on some level, she begins to understand where she can carve a place for herself within American culture. It is the fantasy of her culture that is valued by these Americans. When they first arrive at the restaurant, she notes that "Spanish was something other people paid to be around" (179), and as she watches the dancers performing for Americans who are spending a lot of money to see the show, she is proud of her culture and the beautiful women who are captivating their audience. Mrs. Fanning's interruption as she joins the dancers reveals American women's desire to be as beautiful and exotic as Spanish women. In the bathroom, after Mrs. Fanning kisses her father, Sandi sees, for the first time, that by American standards, she is "pretty":

Looking at herself in the mirror, she was surprised to find a pretty girl looking back at her. [...] She lifted her bangs—her face was delicate like a ballerina's. It struck her impersonally as if it were a judgment someone else was delivering, someone American and important, like Dr. Fanning: she was pretty [...]. Being pretty, she would not have to go back to where she came from. Pretty spoke both languages. Pretty belonged in this country. (182)

Sandi sees that, in the eyes of American culture, those like Dr. Fanning, her value is in her beauty. Being beautiful like the dancers Mrs. Fanning tries to imitate is her best chance to "belong" in America.

When one of the dancers approaches the table with a basket of Barbie dolls dressed in costumes just like hers and asks the girls whether they would like one, Mami glares at them, a

reminder that they are not to ask for any special treats. Sandi ignores her and accepts the doll; the other girls follow suit, and Mami snaps at them to give them back. Mrs. Fanning, hearing the exchange, insists that she and Dr. Fanning pay for the dolls, despite Mami and Papi's protests. When Mami tells Sandi to thank Mrs. Fanning for the gift, "Sandi turned to the woman whose blurry, alcoholic eyes and ironic smile intimated things Sandi was just beginning to learn, things that the dancers knew all about, which was why they danced with such vehemence, such passion." The things Mrs. Fanning and the dancers know all about are twofold: in one sense, she is referring to sexuality, and in another sense, she is referring to the positions of the two cultures. The dancers are a stereotyped fantasy of Spanish female beauty and sexuality that American women at once patronize and desire to imitate. Sandi sees this relationship on some level and, newly aware of her own beauty, acts out the stereotype through the Barbie doll:

She hopped her dancer right up to the American lady and gave her a bow. Mrs. Fanning giggled and returned an answering nod. Sandi did not stop. She pushed her doll closer, so that Mrs. Fanning aped a surprised, cross-eyed look. Holding her new doll right up to the American woman's face and tipping it so that its little head touched the woman's flushed cheek, Sandi made a smacking sound.... "Gracias," Sandi said, as if the Barbie doll had to be true to her Spanish costume." (191)

By accepting Mrs. Fanning's gift of the doll, the embodiment of the Spanish dancers, and aping them through her exaggerated, playful display of gratitude for Mrs. Fanning's benefit, Sandi enacts the cultural identity of the dancers. She is "pretty" now, but she will one day become like the dancers, a beautiful Spanish woman who "belongs" in America, bridging the divide between the two cultures through her acceptance of the stereotype.

As illustrated in the episode with the Fannings, the Garcias' experience of culture shock is intensified by the degree of difference between their cultural place in American society and their place on the Island. Their culture shock is further intensified by their struggle to find acceptance in their immediate social environment. As Oguz notes, the intensity of culture shock and the accompanying alienation may be mitigated or exacerbated by the host society's reception of the immigrant. When the host society is welcoming, it may be easier for the immigrant to adjust, while an unwelcome reception is likely to increase anxiety and encourage isolation, prolonging the individual's experience of culture shock (Oguz 56).

The alienation the Garcia girls experience as they attempt to adjust to their new environment is exacerbated by their early experiences of racism. In their first apartment, the Garcias live above an older woman they refer to as "La Bruja." The woman complains to the super incessantly: "The Garcias should be evicted. Their food smelled. They spoke too loudly and not in English. The kids sounded like a herd of wild burros" (Alvarez 170). The woman is, as Sandi says, "the devil—her living below them made sense." In addition to her complaints about the Garcias, La Bruja assaults them with racial epithets: "One day soon after they moved in, La Bruja had stopped her mother and the girls in the lobby and spat that ugly word the kids at school sometimes used: 'Spics! Go back to where you came from!'" (171).

The epithet is repeated by other Americans the girls encounter. For example, Carla is bullied at school, where, on the playground, "a gang of boys chased after her, calling her names, some of which she had heard before from the old lady neighbor in the apartment they had rented in the city [...]." The boys taunt her: "'Go back where you came from, you dirty

spic!' 'Stop!' Carla cried. 'Please stop.' 'Eh-stop!' They mimicked her. 'Plees eh-stop'" (153). The other girls are also bullied. After a few years in their new school, Yolanda implores Mami to help them: "'We're not going to that school anymore, Mami!'" But Mami forces them to accept their position, seeing the abuse as an unavoidable part of their adjustment: "'You have to.' Her eyes would widen with worry. 'In this country, it is against the law not to go to school. You want us to get thrown out?'" Yolanda is not convinced: "'You want us to get killed? Those kids were throwing stones today!'" Mami persists: "'Sticks and stones don't break bones,' she chanted. Yoyo could tell, though by the look on her face, it was as if one of those stones the kids had aimed at her daughters had hit her. But she always pretended they were at fault. 'What did you do to provoke them? It takes two to tangle, you know'" (135-136). Mami's insistence that the girls simply accept the bullying reflects immigrants' position in society; to survive, to one day be successful, they must bow their heads and accept their subservient status.

d. Social Support

Because immigrants leave so many people behind, losing important relationships and social connections, access to adequate social support in the new environment is critical in the prevention of mental illness (Bhugra 246; Furnham and Bochner 185). Furnham and Bochner cite a significant body of research finding that "social support is directly related to increased psychological well-being and to a lower probability of [...] mental illness," while, conversely, "deficiencies in social support are related to the emergence of psychiatric symptoms" (185). When the Garcias arrive in the States, their only source of social support is Mami's parents,

who help them financially. They do not belong to a group of other immigrants from the Dominican Republic, and most of the immigrants they encounter from other countries are not welcoming. The second-generation Irish immigrant children at the girls' schools bully them, and their apartment building's Puerto Rican super and Irish doorman are pleasant but do not represent a meaningful source of social support. Dr. Fanning has helped Papi escape the Island and arranged for his fellowship, but the Garcias have only a superficial relationship with the Fannings. For the most part, the family is alone, their only source of support, each other.

Both the availability and quality of social support are crucial. Dejarlais et al. have found that, in addition to membership in a community of fellow immigrants, migrating and living with family are "protective factors" against the risk of psychological distress (146). However, while immigrating with family is generally a protective factor, there are situations when the presence of other members of the immigrant's family may exacerbate, prolong, complicate, or even create additional stress during the period of adjustment, ultimately straining relationships within the family (Tseng 707-708). Parent-child relations within the family that immigrates together frequently give rise to conflicts, creating additional stress as the family attempts to adjust to the new culture. Handicaps in communication, a widening generation gap, and role reversal are factors influencing the level of familial conflict post-migration, which, depending on the severity of the conflicts created, may increase the individual members of the family's susceptibility to mental illness (709). In the early stages of the Garcias' post-migration adjustment, their operation as a family unit is vital to their success. For the girls, having each other to lean on through grade school and into college

creates solidarity and provides the support they need as they make the transition from childhood to adulthood, from one culture to the next. Their relationship with their parents remains strong; however, as the girls' language abilities and cultural adjustment begin to outpace that of their parents, the resulting parent-child conflict hinders the girls' successful acculturation.

According to Tseng, situations in which the family must acquire a new language are particularly difficult because children tend to acquire the language more quickly than their parents and also begin to lose their native tongue, giving rise to communication handicaps between the generations (709). Communication issues also lead to a widening of the generation gap between parent and child. As the ability of parents to communicate effectively with their children degrades, so does their authority. When children "acquire new knowledge faster than their parents, become more skilled in the language, and more familiar with the rules and situations of the host society, they become more 'capable' than their parents in many ways." As a result, parents "lose their power and ability to discipline them" (709). Mami and Papi's authority over the girls begins to wane as the girls become more fluent than their parents in English, a language in which Mami and Papi were more proficient upon the family's arrival. To the girls, Mami and Papi once spoke English with authority, but now their shortcomings in the language are painfully obvious, and with their new dominance in English, the girls begin to lose respect for their parents, who continue to communicate with them primarily in English. Mami "spoke in English when she argued with them. And her English was a mishmash of mixed-up idioms and sayings that showed she was 'green behind the ears,' as she called it. If her husband insisted she speak in Spanish to the girls so they wouldn't

forget their native tongue, she'd snap, 'When in Rome, do unto the Romans'" (Alvarez 135). In response to the speech Yolanda writes in the ninth grade, a speech that Yolanda characterizes as the discovery of her voice in English, Papi becomes enraged. He is offended by its insolent and disrespectful tone, an illustration of the loss of old world values. Yet, he uses English, not Spanish, to express his rage: "His anger was always more frightening in his broken English. As if he had mutilated the language in his fury—and now there was nothing to stand between them and his raw, dumb anger." Perhaps sensing that the girls' American voices now dominate the parents' Spanish ones, Mami sides with Yo: "She stood by Yoyo's side, shoulder to shoulder. They looked down at Carlos. 'That is no tone of voice—' she began. But now, Carlos was truly furious. It was bad enough that his daughter was rebelling, but here was his own wife joining forces with her. Soon he would be surrounded by a houseful of independent American women" (145-146).

The disparity in language acquisition parallels a disparity in acculturation. Children learn the new language more quickly and thus acquire new information from their new environment and culture before their parents; they essentially begin to function in the culture more fluently and effectively than their parents (Tseng 709). While Mami and Papi are more proficient in English when the family arrives, the girls quickly surpass them. The breadth and depth of the girls' knowledge of English also enable them to become more fluent in American culture than their parents. As Tseng explains, such disparity in language acquisition "creates handicaps in communication and information exchange between parents and children; the children develop awareness and understanding of the new culture that is deeper than that of their parents, but, because of the language differences, the children are unable to effectively

relay that knowledge to their parents, giving rise to frustration and conflict between the generations” (709). Because of the girls’ ability to acculturate more quickly than Mami and Papi, they become more “American,” and thus, “they begin to hold different sets of knowledge, views, and values, as if they belong to a different culture than their parents” (709). Gómez -Vega explains, “adjusting to the North American lifestyle means breaking away from their parents and turning their backs on the things which they associate with Santo Domingo” (88). As their Tia Carmen remarks, “These girls have lived so long away, they have gotten American ways” (Alvarez 130).

As the girls begin to change, Mami and Papi resist. The girls would “seek [Mami] out at night when she seemed to have a moment to talk to them: they were having trouble at school or they wanted her to persuade their father to give them permission to go into the city or to a shopping mall or a movie—in broad daylight, Mami! Laura would wave them out of her room. ‘The problem with you girls...’ The problem boiled down to the fact that they wanted to become Americans and their father—and their mother, too, at first—would have none of it” (134-135). As the years pass, the girls begin to feel that their parents’ overbearing “old world” style of parenting is hindering their ability to succeed in their new environment. Luis notes, Mami and Papi “do not adapt to the changing culture of the 1960s and treat their daughters as if they were still living in the Dominican Republic,” while the girls “are also responding to the North American environment in which they live, more liberal and permissive than the traditional one known to their parents” (842). As Yolanda laments, “In the close quarters of an American nuclear family, their mother’s prodigious energy was becoming a real drain on their self-determination” (139). Ultimately, “the control the parents want to

maintain over the daughters, an indication of Dominican culture, and the girls' need to rebel, a mark of North American society, results in cultural and personal conflicts" (Luis 842).

3. The Emergence of Mental Illness: Nowhere Left to Hide

Yolanda and Sandra reach adulthood two decades after their family was forced to flee the Island. They experience childhood traumas, a violent uprooting, the loss of language, hostility and alienation, and awkward attempts at assimilation. Each step of the way, both girls become increasingly vulnerable to mental illness until the stress of forging a path for themselves as adults proves to be too much, breaching their thresholds and throwing them into madness.

Both Yolanda and Sandra are hospitalized several years post-migration. While their official diagnoses are not shared, Sandra appears to suffer from anorexia nervosa, and both Sandra and Yolanda exhibit the symptoms of psychosis. While it is difficult to accurately diagnose a specific psychotic illness in either sister because their symptom pictures are incomplete and the specific duration of their illnesses is unclear, Sandra appears to develop schizophrenia and Yolanda suffers "psychotic disorder not otherwise specified (NOS)" (Dziegielewski and Green 251). Schizophrenia and psychotic disorder NOS share the positive and negative symptoms of psychosis outlined in Chapter Two's analysis of Shan's experience in *The Coffin Tree* (see also Dziegielewski and Green 250-251, 257; Corcoran and Walsh 413).

Yolanda's Descent into Psychosis

Yolanda's experiences through the stages of migration increase her vulnerability to mental illness until she experiences a psychotic break precipitated by the failure of her marriage to John. The main symptoms of psychosis that she exhibits are auditory, somatic, and visual hallucinations and disorganized thoughts illustrated through her speech and behavior (see Dziegielewski and Green 250; Corcoran and Walsh 413). Yolanda's admission to the hospital is prompted by her increasingly disorganized thoughts and speech, symptoms that "are often very obvious and easy to detect," and thus symptoms that her parents quickly identify as worrisome (Dziegielewski and Green 258). According to Dziegielewski and Green, a person suffering from a psychotic disorder frequently exhibits "disorganized thought processes," which "can be seen in his/her disordered patterns of speech." For example, the individual "may make loose associations and jump from one topic to another, or their speech may be tangential or even incoherent" (258). Yolanda's disorganized thoughts are first illustrated in the note she leaves for John:

When she left her husband, Yo wrote a note, *I'm going to my folks till my head-slash-heart clear*. She revised the note: *I'm needing some space, some time, until my head-slash-heart-slash-soul*—No, no, no, she didn't want to divide herself any more, three persons in one Yo.

John, she began, then she jotted a little triangle before *John*. *Dear*, she wrote on a slant. She had read in a handwriting analysis book that this was the style of the self-assured. *Dear John, listen, we both know it's not working.*

"*It's?*" he would ask. "*It's*, meaning what?"

Yo crossed the vague pronoun out.

We are not working. You know it, I know it, we both know it, oh John, John. Her hand kept writing, automatically, until the page was filled with the dark ink of his name. She tore the note up and confettied it over her head, a rainfall of John's. She wrote him a short memo, *Gone*—then added—*to my folks*. She thought of signing it, Yolanda, but her real name no longer sounded

like her own, so instead she scribbled his name for her, *Joe*. (Alvarez 78-79, orig. italics)

Yolanda cannot organize her thoughts as she is leaving her husband. She makes several false starts, all of which lead to dead ends. She cannot express herself. Her mind is spinning out of control and she cannot regain her equilibrium.

When she returns to her parent's house, her thoughts continue to spin as her break from reality escalates. She begins to exhibit the racing thoughts and disorganized speech characteristic of psychosis. She talks incessantly: "Her parents were worried. She talked too much, yakked all the time. She talked in her sleep, she talked when she ate [...]. She talked in comparisons, she spoke in riddles" (79). Her speech also reflects stereotyped patterns of thinking, as she repeats herself and parrots what she has read: "She ranted [...]. She quoted famous lines of poetry and the opening sentences of the classics" (79). When her parents take her to the hospital, she is completely incoherent, unable to understand, much less communicate with the doctor: "'Can you hear me!' Doctor Payne held his hands up to his mouth like a megaphone and made believe he was yelling over a great distance. 'Can you hear me?' She quoted to him from Rumi; she sang what she knew of 'Mary Had a Little Lamb,' mixing it up with 'Baa baa, Black Sheep'" (79).

Yolanda's auditory and somatic hallucinations also appear before she is admitted to the hospital. Before she leaves him, John brings her flowers after they have a fight:

He came home with a bouquet of flowers that she knew he had paid too much for. They were blue, and she guessed they were irises. *Irises* was her favorite name for flowers, so they had to be irises.

But as he handed them to her, she could not make out his words. They were clean, bright sounds, but they meant nothing to her.

“What are you trying to say?” she kept asking. He spoke kindly, but in a language she had never heard before.

She pretended she understood. She took a big smell of the flowers. “Thank you, love.” At the word *love*, her hands itched so fiercely that she was afraid she would drop the flowers.

He said something happily, again in sounds she could not ascribe meanings to.

“Come on, love,” she asked his eyes; she spoke precisely as if she were talking to a foreigner or a willful child. “John, can you understand me?” She nodded her head to let him know that he should answer her by nodding his head if words failed him.

He shook his head, No.

She held him steady with both hands as if she were trying to nail him down into her world. “John!” she pleaded. “Please, love!”

He pointed to his ears and nodded. Volume wasn’t the problem. He could hear her. “Babble babble.” His lips were slow motion on each syllable.

He is saying *I love you*, she thought! “Babble,” she mimicked him. “Babble babble babble babble.” Maybe that meant, *I love you too*, in whatever tongue he was speaking.

He pointed to her, to himself. “Babble?”

She nodded wildly. Her valentine hairline, the heart in her ribs and all the ones on her sleeves twinkled like the pinchers of the crab in the sky. Maybe now they could start over, in silence. (77-78, orig. italics)

Yolanda, trying to communicate with John, hears only “babble,” not cognizable words. Her auditory hallucination represents a break from reality. As Gómez -Vega notes, this break happens after Yolanda and John argue about having sex, and thus the problem “springs from her awareness that she speaks a language different from the language of the men with whom she falls in love” (91). Building on this idea, Castells suggests that the problem is Yolanda’s need to “save their marriage by finding common linguistic ground with John – ‘She winced, taking on his language only to convince him’” (39, citing Alvarez 73). Both of these contentions are true, and, as discussed below, Yolanda’s auditory hallucination in which she loses the ability to hear and speak to the man she supposedly “loves” ultimately stems from

her inability to truly understand the meanings of words, including “love,” because she has not found her “voice in English.” Once she recovers, the word “love” returns to her in English.

In addition to the auditory hallucination surrounding the expression of love, Yolanda begins to have somatic hallucinations: her skin begins to “itch” when she says the word “love,” a sensation she describes later as “a random allergy to certain words” (Alvarez 82). In the hospital, Yolanda continues to experience these somatic hallucinations: “She does not know which [words she will react to], until they are on the tip of her tongue and it is too late, her lips swell, her skin itches, her eyes water with allergic reaction tears.” She says the word “love” again, and “sure enough the skin on her arm erupts into an ugly rash.” When she says “alive,” her “lips burn” (82). Then one of her somatic hallucinations transmutes into a visual one, as she describes, “deep within her, something stirs, an itch she can’t get to.” At first she thinks this could be indigestion. Her stomach hurts; she rubs her belly, “[b]ut the beating inside her is more desperate than hunger, a moth wild inside a lampshade.” The sensation intensifies: “It rises, a thrashing of wings, up through her trachea—until Yo retches...she feels ticklish wings unfolding like a fan at the base of her throat. They spread her mouth open as if she were screaming a name out over a great distance. A huge, black bird springs out; it perches on her bureau, looking just like the raven in Yo’s first English poetry book” (83). As the bird begins to fly, she feels the air blown into her face then panics as it heads toward the unopened window, but “the dark shape floats easily through the screen like smoke.” The bird flies from the building but suddenly stops midair and plunges down toward her doctor who is sunning himself on the lawn. She screams “as the hooked beak rips at the man’s shirt and chest; the white figure on the lawn is a red sop.” Terrified, “Yo bangs on the screen. The man

looks up, trying to guess a window.” She cries out, ““Are you all right?”” He tries to guess who is yelling to him, finally realizing it is Yolanda, ““Oh, Joe!”” But, hearing her name, “her lips prickle and pucker. Oh no, she thinks, recognizing the first signs of her allergy—not my own name!” (83-84).

Yolanda’s hallucination of the black bird is a symptom of her illness, but it also has symbolic significance. The black bird is an allusion to Poe’s “The Raven,” as Yolanda, who as a child memorized Poe’s “Annabel Lee,” likens the image to “the raven in [her] first English poetry book.” “The Raven” is narrated by a man who, like Yolanda, is in the midst of a psychotic break precipitated by the loss of his lover. His inability to understand and cope with the intense mental and emotional anguish he is experiencing has led to an unravelling of his consciousness, as he hallucinates his interaction with the raven. The narrator’s obsessive and increasingly frantic thoughts are reflected in the circularity and repetition of the poem, which seems to spiral more and more out of control with each desperate plea to the raven, who coldly repeats, “nevermore.” Like Poe’s narrator, Yolanda’s descent into psychosis is prompted by the loss of her lover, as her thoughts spiral and become increasingly agitated and disorganized, reflected in her inability to use language to formulate and express her emotions, as revealed in her auditory hallucination during her final interaction with John, her struggle to write her farewell note, and her failure to communicate with her parents upon her retreat home.

In Poe’s poem, the raven rests on a bust of Pallas, an allusion to the goddess of wisdom, Athena. Looking down on the narrator who is prostrate before it, the raven responds, “nevermore,” as the narrator pleads that he be reunited with Lanore in death, suggesting that he

will never again know such love. During her time in the hospital, Yolanda's internal struggle revolves around her obsessive attempt to rationalize "love," to understand and define it. Unlike Poe's narrator, however, whose plea to the raven, "Take thy beak from out my heart, and take thy form from off my door!" is forever answered with "nevermore" as he collapses beneath the raven's shadow, resigned to eternal despair, Yolanda learns that she can experience love again. At one point, just before her hallucination of the black bird, she asks Dr. Payne, "What is love?" When he asks her what she thinks love is, she says, "I don't know." He assures her, "Oh, Joe [...] we constantly have to redefine the things that are important to us. It's okay not to know. When you find yourself in love again, you'll know what it is" (Alvarez 82). At this point, Yolanda already feels that she loves Dr. Payne, and his reassurance that she will know love when she feels it again enables her to release the black bird from within her. When she retches as the bird makes its way up her throat, she thinks, "How tragic! At her age to die of a broken-heart attack." The bird symbolizes her broken heart, her fear and doubt that she will ever love again. It flies from her window and attacks Dr. Payne with its "hooked beak" before disappearing in the distance. Yet, he is unharmed. Her feelings for Dr. Payne survive her "broken-heart attack." Through her renewed ability to love, Yolanda, unlike Poe's narrator, has exorcized the raven.

No longer tortured by the circular, agitated thoughts and attempts to understand her despair, Yolanda's emotional turmoil subsides, but her "allergy" remains, as illustrated by her reaction to Dr. Payne's calling her name from the lawn. When the bird has left and "[i]nside her ribs, her heart is an empty nest," she is also ready to rid herself of her "allergy" to certain words: "She will build immunity to the offending words" by repeating them over and over.

Now that her broken heart, fear, and doubt have fled her body in the shape of the black bird, she can regain her mind's equilibrium. Ultimately, she "cures" herself by learning again how to formulate her own words to speak, rather than relying on the words written by others: "She looks up at the thunderclouds... There isn't a sample of blue up there to remind her of the sky. So she says, '*Blue.*' She searches for the right word to follow the blue of *blue*. '*Cry...why...sky...*' She gains faith as she says each word, and dares further: '*World...squirrel...rough...tough...love... enough...*'...The words tumble out, making a sound like the rumble of distant thunder, taking shape, depth, and substance. Yo continues: '*Doc, rock, smock, luck,*' so many words. There is no end to what can be said about the world" (85). Two decades after she uses Whitman's words as her own "voice in English" even though she doesn't truly understand the meaning of those words, her own words fail her, resulting in her hospitalization. But they are ultimately replaced with meaning – and Yolanda's true voice. As words return to her, they are English words, not Spanish, and even "love," which once caused her so much pain, belongs to her in English.

Yolanda's final post-migration experience in the text is her return to the Dominican Republic sometime after her hospitalization. She meets a poet at one of her cousins' parties, and they apparently argue about which language is her "mother tongue." He contends that "no matter how much of it one lost, in the midst of some profound emotion, one would revert back to one's mother tongue. He put Yolanda through a series of situations. What language, he asked, looking pointedly into her eyes, did she love in?" (13). Yolanda's breakdown is precipitated by her and her American husband's inability to communicate love in their marriage, speaking only English, and this failure renders Yolanda incapable of

communicating in any language. Yet as she begins to reacquire language in the hospital, English is the language through which the word “love” returns to her, making English the language she “loves” in.

The poet’s theory is tested even more directly the very next day, during Yolanda’s encounter with the *campesinos* when her car breaks down on a deserted road. When they approach her, she is frightened, unable to decide whether to talk with them as a Dominican who belongs there or an American who is simply visiting. Finally, one of the men asks her if she is an American, and she nods: “Then, as if the admission itself loosens her tongue, she begins to speak, English, a few words, of apology at first, then a great flood of explanation” (20). Admitting she is an American enables her to finally speak, and she is speaking English to men who were once her people, people who live on the island and speak Spanish. Her fear subsides and, realizing that the men do not understand a word she is saying, Yolanda motions them to the broken down car: “And as if after dragging up roots, she has finally managed to yank them free of the soil they have clung to, she finds she can move her own feet to the car” (21). In her terror, “in the midst of some profound emotion” as the poet described the night before, she finds her tongue in English, not Spanish. Finally finding her true voice, her “voice in English.”

Sandra’s Descent into Schizophrenia

In addition to a genetic predisposition to psychosis, Sandra’s pre-migration experiences increase her vulnerability to mental illness, and she begins to exhibit premorbid negative symptoms before the family leaves the Dominican Republic. As the stressors of

migration accumulate, she becomes increasingly vulnerable until the stress of moving away from her family and living alone finally pushes her over her threshold. Because the portrait of Sandra is incomplete, based only on the two chapters written from her perspective and the six pages dedicated to her mother's description of her illness, it is impossible to know the true extent of Sandra's symptoms. The information provided, however, strongly suggests that Sandra succumbs to schizophrenia, the symptoms of which she begins to exhibit as a child and which reach clinical levels when she is in her early twenties. (For a detailed explanation of the symptomatology of schizophrenia see the discussion of Shan's experience in Chapter Two).

Because both Sandra and Yolanda eventually develop psychosis, it is likely that Sandra has a genetic predisposition. She is further confronted pre-migration by several environmental and stress factors known to increase one's vulnerability to schizophrenia: Confined within the compound walls, protected from the threatening world on the other side, she faces a "threatening physical environment." She has numerous "emotionally intrusive or demanding experiences" and childhood traumas, such as the traumatic encounter with Don José resulting in a broken arm and multiple operations to repair it. She experiences "emotional deprivation" and the "disruption" of her "cognitive processes" as one of several indistinguishable de la Torre girls -- invisible, unable to express her own feelings or form her own identity (Corcoran and Walsh 417). Because her identity is based solely on her membership in a group of undifferentiated girls, either the other girls of her extended family or her sisters who all dress in identical outfits because their mother "couldn't indulge identities," she is unable to develop a self-concept or autonomy. In fact, her sister Carla, who

becomes a psychoanalyst, concludes that the identical outfits “weakened the four girls’ identity differentiation abilities and made them forever unclear about personality boundaries” (Alvarez 41).

As a result of these pre-migration factors, some signs of the disease begin to manifest while Sandra is still in the Dominican Republic. After the traumatizing experience with Don José, she is a “changed child.” The experience with Don José and the months of healing and operations to fix her arm “had turned me inward. But now when the world filled me, I could no longer draw it out. I was sullen and dependent on my mother’s sole attention, tender-hearted, and whiney: the classic temperament of the artist but without anything to show for my bad character” (254). With low self-esteem and crippled by her anxiety, Sandra clings to her mother. She becomes emotionally withdrawn, losing interest in life activities. She no longer plays with the other children and she never draws again. When the family is forced to flee, the girls are instructed to bring one toy with them, but Sandra can think of nothing: “nothing quite filled the hole that was opening wide inside Sandi” (215). At just ten years old, Sandra is beginning to feel that there is something very wrong happening within her, a “hole” opening, the beginning of an illness that will gradually consume her.

Tracing the path of Sandra’s descent once the family leaves the island is complicated by the fact that very little of her experience is relayed directly. Aside from the chapter “Still Lives,” which describes the pre-migration experience surrounding Sandra’s encounter with Don José, only one other chapter is written from Sandra’s point of view. “Floor Show,” the first episode of the family’s post-migration experience is the last we hear of Sandra until she briefly resurfaces in the six pages describing her mother’s explanation of Sandra’s illness to

the psychiatrist at the mental hospital. Thus, it is impossible to identify the specific path of Sandra's descent and the chronology and severity of her symptoms from the arrival of the Garcias in America to her ultimate hospitalization as a young adult. The only characterization of Sandra's post-migration mental state during the ten years prior to her hospitalization comes when the girls are packing their things to flee for America. Unlike her sisters, Sandra cannot choose a toy to bring with them: "nothing quite filled the hole that was opening wide inside Sandi. [...] Nothing would quite fill that need, even years after, not the pretty woman she would surprise herself by becoming, not the prizes for her schoolwork and scholarships to study now this and now that she couldn't decide to stay with, not the men that held her close and almost convinced her when their mouths came down hard on her lips that this, this was what Sandi had been missing" (215). Sandra's persistent drive to achieve as she moves from one thing to the next in rapid and agitated succession suggests that restlessness is the earliest positive symptom of psychosis that she exhibits.

Because it is implied that Sandra shares many of the post-migration experiences relayed by her sisters, it is possible to identify several environmental and stress factors post-migration that further increase her vulnerability to schizophrenia. Sandra again lives in a threatening physical environment, this time the shockingly different and unfriendly landscape of New York City. The initial adjustment to this new environment is emotionally intrusive and demanding, and because her parents are suffering through their own issues as they adjust, they are emotionally unavailable to help her. Her cognitive processes are disrupted because she goes through puberty before becoming fully acclimated to her new environment, language, and culture. Being violently transplanted from the relative security of her family

compound on the island to the cold and unwelcoming atmosphere of New York is traumatizing. The family's low socio-economic status during the first few years of their new lives and the family dysfunction, evident in the significant inter-generational conflict as the girls become acculturated, further aggravate Sandra's development of schizophrenia.

In the year or so leading up to her hospitalization, Sandra faces additional environmental and stress factors that trigger her illness. She moves away from home to attend a graduate program. This is an emotionally intrusive and demanding experience because it is the first time she has lived away from her family; even in college she had lived with her sisters. Because she is all alone in a new environment and has no access to her support system, she becomes isolated and suffers emotional deprivation. She develops anorexia nervosa, which according to Mami started as a "crazy diet" that Sandra just never stopped, so that by the time Mami and Papi come for her, she is "a toothpick" (54). The anorexia could actually have been triggered by the existing psychosis, and it also shows a decline in self-care. Anorexia aggravates the existing psychotic symptoms and gives rise to new ones as she becomes progressively detached from reality. As Mami describes, "Every time we talked to her over the phone, her voice seemed further and further away" (53). Her social functioning declines significantly. She makes no friends, stops going to class, and spends all of her time alone in her apartment reading. Mami and Papi are finally called by the university because Sandra is hospitalized, "too weak to do anything" (53).

By the time they bring her home, Sandra is suffering from full-blown schizophrenia. She exhibits numerous positive symptoms of schizophrenia, specifically delusions of reference, hallucinations, disorganized speech and behavior, excitement and restlessness, and

hostility. Her negative symptoms include emotional withdrawal, social withdrawal, poor rapport, and passivity. Sandra has several delusions all related to the idea that she is becoming inhuman. She has lists and lists of books to read and reads incessantly: “After she finished one, she crossed it off the list. Finally she told us why she couldn’t stop reading. She didn’t have much time left. She had to read all the great works of man because soon...soon she wouldn’t be human.... She told us she was being turned out of the human race. She was becoming a monkey” (54). She experiences somatic hallucinations: “Already the other organs inside her body were a monkey’s. Only her brain was left, and she could feel it going.... If she read all the great books, maybe she’d remember something important from having been human. So she read and read. But she was afraid she’d go before she got to some of the big thinkers” (55). Mami makes all of Sandra’s favorite dishes, but she refuses to eat: “She said she didn’t want to eat animals. In her own time, she said, she would be that chicken. She would be that red snapper. Evolution had reached its peak and was going backwards” (55). Mami and Papi finally decide to commit her when she begins to have visual hallucinations: “One morning, I go in her room to wake her up, and I find her lying in bed and looking up at her hands.... I call her name, Sandi!, and she keeps turning her hands, this way, that, and staring at them. I scream at her to answer me, and she doesn’t even look at me. Nothing. And she’s making these awful sounds like she’s a zoo.... And my Sandi holds up her hands to me.... And she screams, *Monkey hands, monkey hands*” (55).

Sandi’s anorexia and hallucinated transformation into a monkey recall an earlier episode when Carla describes to Sandi an experiment she read about in her clinical psychology class: “These baby monkeys were kept in a cage so long, they wouldn’t come out

when the doors were finally left open. Instead, they stayed inside and poked their arms through the bars for their food, just out of reach” (131). Sandi becomes trapped within herself after she discovers Don José chained like a beast in the shed, driven mad by his compulsion to work incessantly on his sculptures. She sees her own reflection superimposed on the image of his face looking through the window at her, and when she falls to the ground, breaking her drawing arm, she lands in a puddle, and rises “soiled with mud like a creature’s” (252). She is forever changed by the experience and turns inward, where she is safe. She is like a baby monkey, trapped in the cage where her family cares for her. But when she moves away from the family to attend graduate school, she is on her own for the first time. The door is opened. She is free to leave, to discover who she is, to “draw it out” (254), but she has been trapped inside herself for so long that she does not know how to release the creative genius built up within her. She is so afraid of doing it wrong that she drives herself mad, incessantly reading the works of one genius after another, looking for some example or map she can follow. She finds none, and because she never leaves the cage, she starves.

C. Conclusion

Julia Alvarez’s *How the Garcia Girls Lost Their Accents* illustrates that those who immigrate as children face a set of circumstances that may render them particularly vulnerable to the development of mental illness. Yolanda and Sandra are both traumatized as young children pre-migration. Then they are forced to flee their home in the middle of the night fearing for their lives, leaving everything and everyone they love behind. They arrive as outsiders in an inhospitable land where they are forced to learn English and lose Spanish,

leaving them unable to understand their experience in either. They confront the loss of socioeconomic status and intense experiences of culture shock, always holding on to each other to survive. But when they enter adulthood and venture out into the world as individuals, the extent of their vulnerabilities is fully exposed. Yolanda loses the voice she never really had and spirals into psychosis before she is able to reconcile her experience in a therapeutic setting, finally emerging with a new, healthy vision of her future. Sandra, unable to escape the prison within her, succumbs to schizophrenia, the success of her recovery unclear.

IV. CONCLUSION

We are accustomed to an idealized, even sentimental, immigrant narrative, one that acknowledges initial hardships, while celebrating the inevitable rags-to-riches success of those who eagerly embrace American culture and dedicate themselves wholeheartedly to the American work ethic. In this vision, immigrants escape the bleak environments of their homelands, embarking for the shores of America, “the land of the free,” the “land of opportunity,” where hope awaits. The Statue of Liberty is the embodiment of the promise of America. Etched on the bronze plaque mounted within it is Emma Lazarus’s iconic poem, “The New Colossus” (1883):

Not like the brazen giant of Greek fame,
With conquering limbs astride from land to land;
Here at our sea-washed, sunset gates shall stand
A mighty woman with a torch, whose flame
Is the imprisoned lightning, and her name
Mother of Exiles. From her beacon-hand
Glow world-wide welcome; her mild eyes command
The air-bridged harbor that twin cities frame.
“Keep, ancient lands, your storied pomp!” cries she
With silent lips. “Give me your tired, your poor,
Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free,
The wretched refuse of your teeming shore.
Send these, the homeless, tempest-tost to me,
I lift my lamp beside the golden door!”

America is the place of rebirth, a place where the successfully assimilated, hardworking immigrant is afforded limitless opportunity to achieve the American Dream. This conception of the immigrant experience is tightly woven into the cultural fabric of America and is rooted

in the popular literature created by and/or about immigrants around the turn of the twentieth century, the era that produced Emma Lazarus's poem.

While there had been an earlier wave of immigrants, primarily from Ireland and Germany, the turn of the century saw an enormous influx of immigrants from eastern and southern Europe. The sudden surge in urban populations led to overcrowding and ghettoization. It also fed middle- and upper-middle class anxiety and xenophobia. The popular literature of the time, written for a primarily middle- and upper-middle class audience, reflects the desire to quell these fears. The tenement tale tradition of the 1880s and 1890s reflects the attempts of authors, many of whom were also "reformers," to provide their audience with a more sympathetic, and thus less threatening, image of the immigrant. The result is something along the lines of the sentimental portraiture of the poor found in the literature of Dickens and his contemporaries. For example, Jacob Riis's *Out of Mulberry Street* (1897) provides fictional sketches of tenement dwellers, who, despite the bleak conditions they face, retain the moral grounding, optimism, and indomitable spirit characteristic of the idealized American persona.

Immigrant literature during this time period is almost apologetic in its depictions of the immigrant experience. The authors themselves were "successful" immigrants who wholeheartedly believed in the American Dream. Their texts present acculturation as simply a process of replacing Old World customs, traditions, and language with their superior American counterparts. And while immigrant writers are critical of the living and working conditions in the tenements, where most new immigrants started out, they allow their heroes to escape the ghetto only slightly scarred. In this way, these early immigrant authors provide a

more realistic immigrant perspective but ultimately reiterate the traditional success story formula employed by native writers.

For example, Mary Antin's autobiography, *The Promised Land* (1912), recounts the story of an immigrant child, who at the age of thirteen escapes persecution in Russia, ultimately landing in Boston, where she feels immediately at home and eagerly adopts the ways of her new land. She is ambitious and hardworking, ultimately entering mainstream American life and becoming a famous and successful writer. In the first lines of the book's introduction, Antin describes her experience as a rebirth: "I was born, I have lived, and I have been made over.... I am just as much out of the way as if I were dead for I am absolutely other than the person whose story I have to tell.... My life I still have to live; her life ended when mine began" (xi). Her work was widely received as a testament that the newest wave of immigrants could become good "Americans." Elias Tobenkin's novel *Witte Arrives* (1916) embraces the same assimilation narrative illustrated in Antin's autobiography. It describes the Americanization of Emile Witte (Wittowski), who emigrates from Russia as a young man, is educated at an American university, and becomes a successful journalist. Witte's experience is contrasted with that of his father, who remains a peddler in the ghetto, unable to let go of the Old World, and thus unable to succeed in America. In addition to the works of Antin and Tobenkin, there is, of course, Israel Zangwill's *The Melting Pot* (1908). Though Zangwill did not coin the phrase "melting pot," his popular play did help to introduce the concept to the general public, and it has come to embody the notion of immigration in the imagination of American society for more than a century. *The Melting Pot* is a play that became popular on the stage because of its hyperbolic romanticization of immigrant life. It optimistically presents

America as a near utopia, a land where life begins anew, where the potential of humanity can be met:

“There she lies, the Great Melting Pot – listen! Can’t you hear the roaring and the bubbling? There gapes her mouth – the harbor where a thousand mammoth feeders come from the ends of the world to pour their human freight. . . . Here shall they all unite to build the Republic of Man and the Kingdom of God. Ah, Vera, what is the glory of Rome and Jerusalem where all nations and races come to worship and look back, compared with the glory of America, where all races and nations come to labor and look forward?” (184)

All of these early immigrant texts provide stories of successful assimilation, and they were all critically acclaimed and widely read and celebrated at the time of their publication.

There was some push-back against this idealized image of immigration by immigrant authors such as O.E. Rolvaag, Mike Gold, and Pietro diDonato, who exposed the social and economic disadvantage insurmountable for many immigrants. But their work was not as well-received as the more optimistic depictions of immigration offered by others, immigrants and native writers alike. Perhaps the most significant, and certainly the most lasting, influences on popular conceptions of the immigrant experience are the novels of Willa Cather. Cather was not an immigrant, but her works, particularly *O! Pioneers* (1913) and *My Antonia* (1918), have become canonized in American literature and continue to be widely read in schools. Both novels provide portraits of immigrants who face hardship and adversity as they struggle and ultimately succeed on the plains of Nebraska at a time when others are giving up and selling their land. They provide examples of true “American grit” and the pioneering spirit of American society, illustrating the vast opportunity provided to those, both immigrants and natives, who are persistent and willing to work for it. For many Americans today, Cather’s

idealized texts are their only exposure to, and thus their only conception of, the immigrant experience.

In stark contrast to the optimistic, idealized immigrant narrative established by early writers and absorbed into the fabric of mainstream American culture, many immigrant texts from the later part of the twentieth century and beyond present a more realistic, and thus darker, illustration of immigration. Many, including Alvarez's and Law-Yone's texts, include characters who develop mental illnesses as they cope with the challenges they face through the stages of migration. Reading these texts through the framework developed in this project reveals that the depth of experience present in immigrant fiction extends far beyond the typical treatment of these novels as illustrations of language acquisition, cultural difference, identity formation, and the like. Analyzing the individual's experiences through the stages of migration fully exposes the dark side of immigration, the devastating mental and emotional impact, which for some proves to be catastrophic. The mainstream cultural conception of the immigrant narrative is subverted. There is no hopeful departure from the old world to the prosperous, welcoming shores of America. There is no illustration of initial hardship overcome through the American work ethic, resulting in the inevitable achievement of the "American Dream." Instead, there is darkness, fear, instability, and madness.

Because of their detailed and realistic treatment of the characters' experiences through the stages of migration, *The Coffin Tree* and *How the Garcia Girls Lost Their Accents* are particularly powerful examples of the relevance and applicability of the framework outlined here, but there are many more texts that can be illuminated. For example, Noel Alunit's *Letters to Montgomery Clift*, Cristina Garcia's *Dreaming in Cuban*, Oscar Hijuelos's

Our House in the Last World, Chang-Rae Lee's *Native Speaker*, Valdimir Nabokov's *Pnin*, John Okada's *No-No Boy*, Julie Otsuka's *When the Emperor Was Divine*, and Rhana Reiko Rizzuto's *Why She Left Us* are all good candidates for further study. In addition, as discussed in greater detail below, Edwidge Danticat's *Breath, Eyes, Memory*, Bharati Mukherjee's *Jasmine*, and Nami Mun's *Miles From Nowhere* are also exceptional examples.

Edwidge Danticat's *Breath, Eyes, Memory*

Breath, Eyes, Memory recounts the experiences of a mother and daughter who migrate separately from Haiti to New York City. Haunted by the memory of her rape and impregnation at the age of sixteen, the mother, Martine, flees to the United States several years before her daughter. Her daughter, Sophie, who is the narrator of the text, is raised by her aunt in Haiti until her mother sends for her when she is twelve years old. Sophie lives with her mother in New York's Haitian ghetto, where she attends a bilingual school (French/English). At this point, Martine is already showing the symptoms of mental illness, which become more acute as she cares for her daughter. For the next six years, Sophie is confined to their apartment, leaving only to attend school or church. When she is eighteen, she begins college, her mother insisting that she become a doctor, but she falls in love with and marries their neighbor, Joseph, who is much older than Sophie. Once she is out of her mother's house, Sophie develops the symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder and bulimia, becoming suicidal.

At the pre-migration stage, Martine, still a virgin, is traumatized by her rape and impregnation (with Sophie) when she is just sixteen years old. As a young, unwed girl, she is ostracized because of her pregnancy and, in addition to the mental and emotional pain associated with her rape, experiences profound alienation and isolation, living in extreme poverty as an outcast. Driven mad by the constant reminders of the trauma she has suffered, Martine abandons Sophie as a baby and flees to the United States. Sophie, too, suffers pre-migration. She is deeply affected by her mother's abandonment and the knowledge that her father is a rapist and her birth was the detestable product of his crime, which ruined her mother's life. She also faces extreme poverty and the constant threat of sexual violence, which pervades the environment she lives in. Her departure from Haiti is extremely sudden and unexpected, leaving her no time to prepare mentally or emotionally for the separation from her aunt, who has acted as her mother, or the only environment she has ever called home. Her peri-migration experience all alone as an illegal passenger on a commercial airliner also puts her in a state of heightened anxiety as she faces the uncertainty of her passage as well as what awaits her upon arrival.

Post-migration, prior to Sophie's arrival, Martine lives among other Haitians in the ghetto, but she does not have personal connections to anyone there. Because of her already severe PTSD and the outsider status ingrained in her pre-migration, she remains isolated. Her language proficiency is not a problem as long as she remains in the ghetto, but she cannot function in the outside world. As a result, she has difficulty finding adequate employment and experiences severe food insecurity and constant fear regarding her living situation. When she does venture out of the ghetto, and even within it to some extent, Martine experiences culture

shock, which is exacerbated by her move from a rural to an urban environment and the hostile reception she experiences in her new society.

Sophie's post-migration experience is colored by some of the same problems Martine faces – culture shock, poverty, alienation, isolation – but Sophie's adversity is exacerbated by Martine's illness. Martine imposes Sophie's isolation, refusing to let her out of the house except to go to church and school. As a result, Sophie has no access to outside social support, making her particularly vulnerable to the abuse she suffers at the hands of her mother. In addition to the absolute control Martine already exercises over her, when Sophie, 18, falls in love with their much older neighbor, Joseph, Martine begins "testing" Sophie's virginity, an extremely intrusive experience that constitutes sexual abuse. After several months of this, Sophie decides to do something to make the "testing" stop. She violently breaks her hymen with a pestle, which is so damaging that it requires her hospitalization. Now that Sophie has become sullied, her mother kicks her out, and she marries Joseph.

Both characters develop mental illness post-migration. Martine shows symptoms of PTSD before migration, as her departure is the product of her restlessness, anxiety, and attempts at avoidance, but her symptoms become acute as she attempts to survive, alone, in the ghetto. She is unfeeling, self-isolating, amnesiac to the past, and suicidal. She suffers horrific nightmares and flashbacks, reliving the trauma she suffered pre-migration, and she soon develops psychosis, becoming increasingly paranoid and suffering delusions. Prior to Sophie's arrival, Martine begins caring for a doll that she pretends is Sophie. The doll becomes her only companion and when Sophie arrives, Martine introduces her to the doll, excited that they are finally meeting, signaling to Sophie that her mother has become very ill.

Attempting to care for Sophie overwhelms Martine's already taxed psychological processes, reviving the intense emotions surrounding her traumatization, and breaking the already tenuous sense of control she has over her environment. In her attempt to regain control of her own mind, Martine becomes controlling and abusive toward Sophie. Toward the end of the novel, after Sophie flees her marriage, returning to Haiti with her child, Martine follows her, intending to reconcile with her. While there, Martine re-experiences the trauma associated with her rape, and, instead of achieving some kind of closure, Martine's PTSD symptoms are heightened and her flashbacks and nightmares begin to bleed into her sense of reality. She tells Sophie that she is pregnant with her long-time boyfriend's baby but wants to have an abortion. Sophie tries to reassure her mother, but the experience proves to be too much for Martine. When they return to New York, she becomes psychotic and commits suicide, stabbing herself 17 times in the stomach.

Sophie also becomes mentally ill post-migration. Already vulnerable because of her pre-migration experiences and with no one else to turn to, she is helpless before her mother's abuse. She has no choice but to share in her mother's illness, as the narrator did in Shan's in *The Coffin Tree*. She adopts her mother's fear of the outside world, accepting her forced isolation, and she has no choice but to follow Martine's rules until she finds another source of social support in Joseph. But her relationship with Joseph only intensifies Martine's abuse. The "testing" begins. While she admits that she was tested by her mother, and it has given her deep emotional scars, Martine still subjects Sophie to the practice. Humiliated and traumatized by the testing, Sophie begins to hate her body and starts to avoid Joseph. To make her mother stop testing her, Sophie takes a pestle and breaks her hymen in an act of defiance

but also of self-hatred. She spends two days in the hospital recovering from her self-inflicted rape wounds and then becomes pregnant “that first painful time” she sleeps with Joseph. She soon becomes bulimic and suicidal, driven into extreme states of fear by nightmares like those that plague her mother. She cannot enjoy sex with Joseph because of the trauma from the testing and Martine’s insistence that sex is filthy and shameful. At the height of her anguish, she leaves Joseph, returning to Haiti with her baby. While she does eventually return, it will be several more years before she has truly healed.

Bharati Mukherjee’s *Jasmine*

Jasmine provides another stark example of the devastating effects of immigration on the individual’s vulnerability to and development of mental illness. Jasmine, the novel’s narrator, shares her experiences through the stages of migration in fragments or flashbacks from the perspective of her life as a farmer’s wife in Iowa, pregnant with her first child. The narrative structure suggests the psychological nature of the story; it is an examination of her memories, of the experiences that are relevant to her path through the stages of migration. Pre-migration, Jasmine experiences social vulnerability due to her family’s poverty, living in one of the poorest regions of India. She also has a weak connection to her culture: forced to accept the gender roles of her traditional society, Jasmine, who has a strong and unique spirit, is alienated until she marries Prakash, who espouses non-traditional, Western values. The pair moves to the city and begin preparations to move to the States so Prakash can attend University, but just days before their scheduled departure, they are in a shop buying a suit for

him and a special dress for Jasmine to take with them to America when a terrorist drives by on a motorcycle and throws a bomb into the store, killing Prakash. Jasmine is severely traumatized by his death, and, resolving to immolate herself and his suit on the quad of the university, undertakes the journey herself.

Jasmine's peri-migration experience is also traumatic. Because Prakash is dead, and the university had only arranged for their travel so that he could study there, Jasmine has no legal means of passage. Instead, she travels illegally and alone, having paid for a place on a ship to America. As is usually the case for illegal immigrants, the journey is long and hellish. Jasmine nearly dies of starvation and suffers repeated sexual assaults by the captain of the ship as well as members of his crew and other passengers. Added to the pre-migration loss of her husband, Jasmine's time in-transit further heightens her traumatization, but when she finally arrives in Florida, she is not yet free. The ship captain takes her prisoner, tying her to a bed in a dirty motel and repeatedly raping her until she finally manages to get loose, kill him, and stumble out onto the street in search of help.

It is at this point that Jasmine suffers her first major episode of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). She enters a dissociative fugue, wandering aimlessly, in a daze, completely amnesiac. When a woman named Lillian Gordon saves her from the side of road and takes her in, she still has no idea who she is or how she got there. Over the next several months, Lillian helps her become Americanized, showing her how to dress and acclimating her to the culture in other ways. In this way, Lillian provides the social support needed for Jasmine to adjust to her new environment, alleviating her initial experiences of culture shock and buffering her sense of alienation. Eventually, Jasmine's memory returns, and she appears to have recovered

from her break with reality. The psychological wounds Jasmine has suffered, however, have not healed, but continue to deepen as she undertakes a series of migrations controlled by the restlessness, anxiety, and attempts at avoidance that are symptomatic of PTSD.

Lillian helps Jasmine find her way to New York, where she stays with some of the people she knows from India who have already lived in the States for a few years. While, at first blush, the arrangement promises to provide Jasmine with the quality social support that can only be found within a group of like immigrants, the Indian ghetto of New York City proves to be more alienating than Jasmine's life among Americans in Florida. As is sometimes the case, living among other immigrants from the individual's home culture can be detrimental to the individual when he/she was already alienated in the home culture or had a weak cultural identity pre-migration. In India, Jasmine had always felt oppressed by traditional gender roles, so now facing a society that expects her to follow the very restrictive cultural rules applicable to widows underlines her sense that, not only is she an alien in American society, she does not even belong in her own culture.

Jasmine escapes the ghetto, continuing her string of migrations. While she does not realize it on a conscious level, her post-migration experience – her decisions, her actions, even her identity and personality – is driven by the symptoms of PTSD. She alternates between states of restlessness, anxiety, even paranoia, and states of complete numbness and dissociation. She stays somewhere for as long as she can float around, numb, dissociated, but as soon as she starts to get attached, she grows restless, anxious, paranoid, and in her drive to avoid being overwhelmed by emotional stimuli, she flees again. Like Shan in *The Coffin Tree*, Jasmine's illness also prevents her from being able to fully accept the social support

available to her, and so, despite her eventual linguistic and cultural adaptation, she continues to struggle.

Nami Mun's *Miles from Nowhere*

Miles from Nowhere focuses on the post-migration experience of its narrator, Joon, a young Korean immigrant living in the Bronx. Because she was very young when her family left Korea, Joon does not remember many details of her own pre-migration experience, but she does describe her family as members of the middle class who came to America because her mother wanted to become the rich owner of a stereotypical American diner. In retrospect, Joon suspects that the move was her mother's attempt to start fresh in an environment where Joon's father, an alcoholic womanizer, would have no choice but to change his ways. Her mother's motive reveals the existence of several relevant pre-migration factors. The father is an alcoholic, indicating that both he and the narrator have a biological vulnerability; alcoholism and other forms of addiction have a strong genetic element. The father's behavior also creates both psychological and social vulnerability for all three members of the family. When one member of the family struggles with alcoholism, the entire family suffers, particularly when that person is also the breadwinner. The unpredictability of her father's behavior and the consequent anxiety and uncertainty her mother faced increased both her psychological vulnerability and Joon's, whose early psychological and social development was inevitably affected by the stress and conflict surrounding her.

Post-migration, Joon's family experiences language difficulties and culture shock, as well as a drop in their socioeconomic status. Joon's mother is particularly affected by the

realization that her dream of owning a diner is not an immediate possibility, and instead, she and her husband have no choice but to work menial jobs in order to survive. The family also has no source of social support and is acutely aware of their “otherness” as the only Asian family in a white neighborhood. Their alienation and isolation never abates, even after several years in the States. In the face of their adversity, it is not long before Joon’s father falls back into his pre-migration pattern of drunkenness and infidelity. He disappears for days, sometimes even a week or more. Joon’s mother does her best to keep them fed and sheltered, but when Joon’s father abandons them completely, her mother suffers a psychotic break. She becomes catatonic, sitting for hours outside, staring straight in front of her, silent. Then she tries to kill herself and is no longer able to care for Joon. Just thirteen years old, Joon sets out on her own to find her father. Unsuccessful, she realizes she is utterly alone. She, too, becomes ill. Her parents’ illnesses have poisoned her environment, traumatizing her, and because of her damaged self-worth, she does not even bother looking for someone to help her. She remains homeless and is consumed by her self-hatred and self-destruction, living on the margins. While Joon’s mental illness is precipitated by her parents’ abandonment of her, the life she finds on the streets serves to accelerate her descent and she soon reaches the nadir of her suffering. Struggling to survive, Joon is forced to work as a prostitute in an escort club and becomes addicted to heroin, numbing herself to the horrors she experiences. For the next several years, Joon continues her desperate path, struggling to get and stay clean, taking any job she can find, but she does finally find her way out.

Final Thoughts

There are certainly other ways to examine the elements of mental illness in immigrant fiction. For example, it is possible to approach these texts in the same manner as critics who provide psychological readings of non-immigrant texts – through the application of trauma theory or the diagnosis of specific mental illnesses -- but these approaches ignore the context of immigration. Illness does not occur in a vacuum. Immigration is a context, and context matters. I wanted to know what it is about immigration that accounts for so much madness in these texts. The robust field of mental health research dedicated to migration is a testament to the vital part the process of migration plays in the development of mental illness. Analyzing immigrant texts through the psychological framework that examines the complex relationship between migration and mental illness both reveals and validates the depth and complexity of the immigrant experience.

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