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**Breaking Barriers, Building Lives: The Experiences of Immigrant Children in the U.S.  
with Reference to Marina Budhos's *Tell Us We're Home***

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**Abstract**

*Immigration has been a defining feature of human society for centuries, as people have moved from one place to another in search of better opportunities, safety, and a higher quality of life. The reasons behind this movement are diverse and can range from political, social, and economic factors to more personal motivations such as the desire for better education or a more prosperous future. One of the most popular destinations for immigrants is the United States, which is widely considered to be one of the most powerful and developed countries in the world. With a robust economy, strong education system, and numerous opportunities for personal and professional growth, the United States attracts people from all over the world who are looking to build a better life for themselves and their families. Despite the many benefits of immigration, the journey to a new country is not without its challenges, particularly for children. Immigrant children often face numerous barriers to their educational success, including cultural differences, language barriers, a lack of information about the educational system, psychological difficulties, and unfavourable living conditions. They may also struggle with the cost of education, which can be a significant burden for families who are already struggling to make ends meet. Marina Budhos's *Tell Us We're Home* sheds light on the experiences of immigrant children in the United States, particularly those who are the children of immigrant workers such as nannies and housekeepers. The book explores the difficulties these children face in balancing their household responsibilities, financial instability, and their education, and highlights the obstacles they must overcome to achieve their educational goals. By bringing attention to the challenges faced by immigrant children, Budhos's work aims to raise awareness and help create a more inclusive and supportive environment for these children to succeed.*

**Keywords:** Migration, Education, Challenges, Young Adults, Barriers.

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Compared to their native counterparts, immigrant children encounter a variety of obstacles in achieving academic success. Recent estimates indicate that approximately 800,000 young migrants reside in the United States, either with or without their families (Anne DiCerbo 1). In instances where migrant families are together, the majority of parents hold low-paying jobs that do not adequately cover their living expenses or their children's educational needs. The significance of education lies in its capacity to fuel societal progress and foster economic advancement.

The United States' education system plays a critical role in developing human capital, making it an attractive destination for international immigrants who seek better educational outcomes. Education, as a pursuit of knowledge, instils a sense of aspiration for a better life, social standing, and meaning (Anne DiCerbo 1), which is why immigrants migrate to America, hoping to provide their children with the best education and quality of life. However, adjusting to a new environment and facing rejection from the native population can be emotionally taxing for immigrants, who must overcome numerous challenges stemming from their surroundings and unfamiliar social norms. In particular, migrant children face difficulties in navigating their family, society, and schooling, as masterfully depicted by American author Marina Budhos in her evocative storytelling.

Marina Budhos is a highly acclaimed American author whose works centre on the experiences of undocumented immigrants, migrant children, and mixed-race girls. In addition to her prolific writing career, she is an accomplished workshop leader and a captivating public speaker. One of her notable works, *Tell Us We're Home*, was selected as a 2017 Essex County YA pick and offers a poignant portrayal of the challenges faced by eighth-grade immigrant children and their parents, who work as housekeepers and nannies. Through an intricately woven plotline, Budhos highlights the struggles of three teenage immigrants- Jaya, Lola, and Maria - each with distinct artistic personalities, as they grapple with typical American adolescent issues, such as navigating race, schooling, and class privilege.

Jaya Lal is an introverted young girl who enjoys drawing, although her mother disapproves and forbids her from using markers or creating artwork. Jaya's mother, who was unable to complete her own nursing studies, hopes that Jaya will pursue a career in nursing. Lola Svetloski, on the other hand, is a confident and enthusiastic history buff who is passionate about the American Revolution. She is outgoing and talkative, with a lively personality. Maria Alvarez, an innocent and youthful schoolgirl, has a cherubic face and a somewhat clumsy demeanour. She becomes enamoured with Tash, a local boy, after he intervenes in a dispute over playing in Grove Field. Despite their differing personalities, the

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three girls unexpectedly become friends, bound by the fact that they are all the daughters of underprivileged nannies and housekeepers.

The United States faces significant challenges related to mass migration, cultural diversity, and integration. One of the key impacts of these challenges is the experience of young immigrant children, who often find themselves caught between their native and host cultures. This dilemma can result in either assimilation, in which immigrant children adapt to the norms of their American peers, or acculturation, in which they blend their native culture with American culture. However, despite their attempts to assimilate, immigrant children may still experience exclusion and ostracism from their American peers, leading them to seek the companionship of other immigrant children. Jaya, Maria, and Lola, despite their diverse backgrounds and values, easily bond as they are all daughters of house cleaners, cooks, and babysitters for affluent families in an American suburb. They do not fully identify with either their native culture or American culture, as they navigate their hybrid identities.

According to Salomone, “Schooling, language, and cultural associations, separately and collectively, shape individual, group, and particularly national identity” (5). Jaya and Maria struggle with alienation from both their ethnic heritage and American culture. Unlike Lola, who is strong, confident, and witty, Jaya and Maria remain average students, innocent and shy. However, they share a sense of not belonging to the new place and become a trio of immigrants. Their friendship is so fitting that they become outsiders together, and their bond is so strong that it makes them forget they are outsiders at all.

According to Salomone, language is considered the “cultural software” through which individuals attach and intuit meaning and give shape to their practices (71). Language difference poses a significant obstacle for immigrants, which is evident in Maria's case, as Spanish is her native language. Initially, she is placed in an ELL (English language learning) class to enhance her language skills and accent. Meadowbrook seems perplexing to her due to her dress, accent, and inability to make her voice heard by her teachers and peers. However, with the help of her teacher, Mrs. Lansky, she is taken out of the class despite her accent. To improve her English, Maria teaches Spanish to others, particularly Tash.

Like other immigrants who voluntarily enter the United States, Mexicans who have migrated to the country recognize the need to overcome linguistic and cultural barriers to achieve success. Mrs. Alvarez, Maria's mother, is unfamiliar with American customs and struggles with English. To assist her mother, Maria provides her with a dictionary containing basic vocabulary and phrases. Nonetheless, Maria still accompanies her mother to interviews in case she requires assistance. Maria wishes for her mother to learn English so that she does not suffer the same difficulties she faces at school when attempting to communicate. Thankfully, with the aid of her friends Lola and Jaya, Maria is able to learn English and successfully navigate life in the United States.

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Likewise, Lola's father, who was a skilled engineer in his home country, encountered obstacles after migrating to the United States due to his limited English proficiency. The entire family struggled with language and accent barriers, which prevented Lola's father from securing stable employment. To make ends meet, Lola's mother, despite her limited English skills, found work as a housekeeper, and with her sister Nadia's support, they were able to maintain their finances. In contrast, Jaya, having been raised in Canada, did not experience any language difficulties.

Children who are immigrants often face humiliating treatment from their American peers due to their immigrant status. This includes being subjected to violent bullying or insults for their accent, appearance, behaviour, and social status. Jaya, Lola, and Maria all experience different forms of this mistreatment. For example, Jaya is singled out by Rachel Meisner, who accuses her of stealing a design from her jewellery shop, despite the fact that Jaya was only inspired by the design and created her own original design. Rachel's bullying of Jaya is also influenced by Jaya's mother's employment in the Meisner family. Maria is frequently excluded from group activities, which leads to her receiving low marks, and she is ridiculed for her accent, dress, and innocence. To avoid further bullying and embarrassment, the girls even lie about their mother's occupation. Lola is the only character who fights against the bullies and stands up for Jaya and Maria, protecting them from further mistreatment.

In order to achieve a successful future, education is crucial for immigrants who leave their country. However, there are additional challenges they must overcome to attain academic success. Immigrant children are required to put in twice the effort of their native peers as they must learn both the language and culture while also mastering the subject matter. Despite earning a straight A grade of ninety percent, Lola must exert much more effort than her classmates to demonstrate her brilliance. Budhos draws a parallel between Lola, an immigrant struggling to excel like native student Rachel, who is both brilliant and mean. Budhos notes that "There was something different about kids like Rachel. It was an air they carried, a casual, I-don't-care-and-beside-you-know-I'm-smart-enough attitude that the teachers just ate up" (15). If anything, negative occurred to these students or if they did not perform well academically, their parents would intervene and defend them. For example, Anthony's parents advocate for his learning challenges, Lola's mother works to provide financial stability, while her father shows no interest in supporting the family. Lola's parents advise her to attend school without causing any trouble.

Immigrant parents are often compelled to abandon their own education during the immigration process, leading them to aspire to provide better schooling for their children than they received in their home country. Consequently, immigrant parents are often relegated to low-paying jobs and live modest lives. For instance, Mrs. Lal's dream of becoming a nurse

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was cut short due to her husband's death, leading her to migrate to the United States. Similarly, Mr. Svetloski, who excelled in school and was the only boy in his village to become a civil engineer, building bridges and roads and managing hundreds of workers in Russia, struggled to find a job with a meagre salary in the US due to his poor English proficiency.

New Jersey, a small state in the United States, is renowned for its high-quality education system and is ranked at the top among all fifty US states, according to Wallethub. This has become the primary reason why many immigrants settle in New Jersey, seeking better educational opportunities for their children. Despite the financial challenges faced by all three immigrant families, Jaya, Lola, and Maria, they chose to reside in this town due to the presence of excellent schools. Mrs. Lal highlights this fact by stating, "Jaya, you know the school system here? It's one of the best. A brand-new biology lab. So much better than what your cousins have in queens. There are possibilities here, darling" (190). Initially, Jaya, Lola, and Maria disliked their new home, but they eventually adapted to their new environment after forming friendships with one another. However, they feel ashamed of their mothers and dislike visiting their workplaces, where they observe their mothers working for the families of the children, they attend school with. Despite their health issues and academic workload, they are compelled to assist their mothers.

The destitution of poor immigrants often leads to false accusations of criminal activity, which exacerbates the negative perceptions of the native population. These accusations not only affect the immigrant workers, but also have an impact on the mental health of their children. Jaya's world darkens when her mother is wrongly accused of stealing from Mrs. Harmon's home, leading to her mother's dismissal and extra work for the Siler family. In order to clear her mother's name, Jaya, Lola, and Maria devote their time to making posters, speaking with Mr. Cramer, and obtaining letters from previous employers. This distracts them from their studies, and they must instead focus on saving Mrs. Lal. As a result, Mrs. Lal asks Jaya to take on a part-time job to help support the family financially.

Lola's sole concern is that her father will find the motivation to work again. Even after her mother's diabetes diagnosis, Lola hoped it would prompt her father to take action. However, it had the opposite effect, causing him to spiral further into self-pity, as noted by Budhos: "It made him to sink further into his own self-pity" (86). Maria, on the other hand, is struggling with depression due to her cousin Renaldo's refusal to let her teach Spanish to Tash. When he assaults her for neglecting household chores and teaching a "white guy," everything becomes a burden for her, including the friendship that had previously made them "outsiders" together. As Budhos puts it, "This country was full of hard stuff and hard people. A place where maids could lose their jobs over stupid earrings. Where high school boys beat

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up Mexicans. Where you didn't have good friends. And the angels were no more than hollow plasters” (114).

The characters in the story face significant difficulties in their academic pursuits, including language barriers and challenging quizzes. Once they are confronted with personal struggles, such as Mrs. Lal's false accusation, their academic focus is disrupted, particularly Lola's, who becomes fixated on proving her innocence. This affects her social presentation, and she ends up destroying Raichel's project. Lola undergoes counselling for her anger issues, to which she responds, “issues. Issues were brown v. board of education” (199)

Immigrants often lead difficult lives, trying to stay under the radar or escape their problems. However, Jaya refuses to believe the false accusation against her mother and works hard to prove her innocence with compelling evidence. Maria ends her friendship with Tash to make him understand the impact of his actions, and Lola seeks help to manage her anger issues and improve her behaviour. Over time, Jaya and Maria gain confidence to speak up for themselves and embrace their identities, while also appreciating their mothers' hard work and sacrifices. Through overcoming their challenges, the three friends learn to value their personalities, identities, and friendship.

In conclusion, the novel *Tell Us We're Home* by Marina Budhos presents the struggles and challenges faced by young immigrant girls and their families in New Jersey. The book explores themes of identity, friendship, prejudice, and hardship. Despite the hardships, Jaya, Lola, and Maria learn to find their voices, stand up for themselves, and appreciate their identities and the sacrifices their families have made. They learn to see their mothers' hard work with admiration and no longer feel ashamed of their occupations. The novel highlights the importance of education, but also shows that it is not always accessible for immigrant families. It sheds light on the misconceptions and prejudice towards immigrants and how they are often falsely accused and judged. Through their trials and tribulations, the characters demonstrate the resilience and strength of immigrant families who strive to make a better life for themselves in a new country they now call home.

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