

**SITUATING WOMEN IN THE DIASPORIC NARRATIVES OF JHUMPA LAHIRI**

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**DECLARATION**

Mizoram University

July, 2015

I, Lalmangaihzuali, hereby declare that the subject matter of this dissertation is the record of work done by me, that the contents of this dissertation did not form basis of the award of any degree to me, or to the best of my knowledge, to anybody else, and that the dissertation has not been submitted by me to any other University or Institute.

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**CERTIFICATE**

This is to certify that “Situating Women in the Diasporic Narratives of Jhumpa Lahiri” written by Lalmangaihzuali has been written under my supervision.

She has fulfilled all the required norms laid down within the M.Phil regulations of Mizoram University. The dissertation is the result of her own investigation. Neither the dissertation as a whole nor any part of it was ever submitted to any other University for any research degree.

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## **CHAPTER I:**

### **Introduction**

The present study proposes to explore and analyze Jhumpa Lahiri's works, namely *Interpreter of Maladies* (1999), *The Namesake* (2003), and *Unaccustomed Earth* (2008).

Jhumpa Lahiri was born Nilanjana Sudeshna on July 11, 1967 to Bengali Indian immigrants in London. She moved with her family to the United States when she was three years old and grew up in Kingston, Rhode Island. When Lahiri began kindergarten, her teacher decided to call her by her pet name, Jhumpa, because it was easier to pronounce than her 'proper name'. She graduated from South Kingstown High School and received her B.A. in English literature from Barnard College in 1989. She then received multiple degrees from Boston University: an M.A. in English, M.F.A. in Creative Writing, M.A. in Comparative Literature, and a Ph.D. in Renaissance Studies. She took a fellowship at Provincetown's Fine Arts Work Center, which lasted for two years (1997–1998). Lahiri has taught creative writing at Boston University and the Rhode Island School of Design. She currently resides in Rome, Italy with her husband and two children.

In an interview published by Houghton Mifflin, Lahiri articulates her experience of growing up with a divided identity:

I never know how to answer the question "Where are you from?" If I say I'm from Rhode Island, people are seldom satisfied. They want to know more, based on things such as my name, my appearance, etc. Alternatively, if I say I'm from India, a place where I was not born and have never lived, this is also

inaccurate...It bothered me growing up, the feeling that there was no single place to which I fully belonged.

Jhumpa Lahiri's stories are often autobiographical, drawing inspiration from her upbringing as a second-generation Indian American, as well as those of her parents, friends, acquaintances, and others in the Bengali community with which she is familiar: "She alludes to her constant listening to the tales of inconvenience her parents or the friends of her parents encountered in their lives" (Das 2013: ix). Since her works are manifestations of tensions that accompany those individuals that cross national borders, Lahiri can be unequivocally identified as a writer of the diaspora.

After facing rejection from publishers for years, her first work *Interpreter of Maladies* was finally published in 1999. The book is a collection of nine short stories that explore themes of identity, the immigrant experience, cultural differences, love, and family. The characters are largely Indians or Indian-Americans, and their stories together paint an evocative picture of India's diaspora. Sheila Benson identifies Jhumpa Lahiri as an "interpreter of family" (qtd. in Das 2013: x), as families feature prominently with their multiple realities in her works. *Interpreter of Maladies* won the prestigious Pulitzer Prize for Fiction in 2000. The book also won several other awards, including the O. Henry Award for the short story 'Interpreter of Maladies,' and the PEN/Hemingway Award for Best Fiction Debut of the Year. The collection was also named The New Yorker's Best Debut of the Year in 2000.

In 2003, Jhumpa Lahiri published her first novel *The Namesake*. The story chronicles the lives of Indian-born parents Ashoke and Ashima who immigrated as young adults to the United

States where they raise their two children, Gogol and Sonia. In the novel, Lahiri highlights Ashima's battles with displacement and homesickness in a new country, while raising children who are essentially Americans. Her debut novel was adapted into a popular film by Mira Nair starring Bollywood superstars Irrfan Khan and Tabu in 2006. The success of the film contributed abundantly in cementing her status as a literary heavyweight of Indian origin.

In 2008, her second collection of short stories called *Unaccustomed Earth* was published. The book is divided into two parts: Part One consists of five separate stories, while Part Two consists of three interlinked stories. In Part Two, the first story is narrated by Hema and is addressed to Kaushik. The second story is narrated by Kaushik as he addresses Hema, while in the last story, a third-person narrator is employed as the two characters meet again after years of separation.

In *Unaccustomed Earth*, Jhumpa Lahiri focuses on second generation immigrants as they attempt to navigate between the values they inherit from their parents and the consequences of their American upbringing. In an interview in 2008, Jhumpa Lahiri states, "Some of the culture goes by the wayside, or the link is never made... I really felt a sense that I was the end of a line..." (Bookforum). In these stories, the second and third generation immigrant women, like Ruma from the title story and Hema from Part Two of the book, are well aware of their status as the end link to the culture and traditions they inherit from their parents.

In 2013, Lahiri published her second novel *The Lowland*. The story chronicles the lives of two brothers Subhash and Udayan Mitra who grew up in Calcutta in the 1950's. Their paths diverge drastically when Udayan joins the Naxalite Movement in the late 1960's, while Subhash



goes to America to study marine chemistry. The novel details the dramatic consequences of each brother's choice, and the story is deeply intertwined with the political unrest in West Bengal during the period the story is set in.

Although Jhumpa Lahiri's works are studied as manifestations of diasporic tensions, a detailed study of these stories vividly illustrates the writer's ability to identify and express her personal dilemmas even in situations that are so different from her own. This serves to reinforce the notion that what is understood as primary concerns of the diasporic communities are in no means confined to only those that cross national and cultural boundaries. Moreover, as Nigamananda Das points out, "excessive emphasis on the diasporic aspect of one's writing may turn the readers' attention away from the artistic and aesthetic quality of a book" (2012: 24). Lahiri herself resists such categorization of her works. She states, "I get frustrated by this tendency to flatten whole segments of the population...They are 'other,' and it's harder to see the nuances and the variations because they're just a group of people" (Bookforum 2008).

She writes about the world she herself inhabits although it is by no means painted with broad strokes and her characters are far from caricatures that represent narrow categorizations based on race. However, across all her stories, the major conflicts that shape her characters, especially the first generation immigrants, can be traced back to their diasporic existence. Thus, as universal as the themes in her stories are, Jhumpa Lahiri is still first and foremost an "interpreter of exile" (Nayar 1).

The term 'diaspora' is first employed in the context of the Jews when persecution and expulsion led to the dispersal of Jews away from their homeland, carrying with them the fond

hope of returning to the motherland one day. The emigration of one group of people to another land dates back as far as the sixth century B.C when the Israelites were expelled due to the conquest of the ancient Kingdom of Judah by Babylon. It subsequently came to be used to refer to the historical movements of the dispersed ethnic population of Israel, to the cultural development of that population or to that population itself. However, over the past two decades, the word 'diaspora' has gained a broader meaning and shed much of its exclusive melancholic association with the Biblical sense of the term.

The term is now gainfully employed in the analysis of emigration and settlement of people beyond the boundaries of their homeland. Thus, in the broadest sense of the term, diaspora can be defined as a segment of people living outside of their homeland. Gabriel Sheffer states, "Modern diasporas are ethnic minority groups of migrant origins residing and acting in host countries but maintaining strong sentimental and material links with their countries of origin-their homelands" (3).

The formation of ethnic diasporas can be broadly classified into the following groups: i) Those that are created by voluntary migration, and ii) Those that are created as a result of expulsion from their homeland, for example, the Jews and the Palestinians. *In Global Diasporas: An Introduction (2008)*, Robin Cohen made classifications based on the economic and social implications of the dispersed population: i) Victim diaspora, e.g. Jews, Africans, Armenians ii) Labour diaspora, e.g. indentured Indians iii) Imperial diaspora, e.g. British iv) Trade diaspora, e.g. Lebanese, Chinese v) Deterritorialised diaspora, e.g. Caribbean peoples, Sindhis, Parsis. Voluntary migration has increased exponentially from the turn of the twentieth century due to

myriad factors like the end of colonialism, industrialization and better economic prospects in Western countries. Needless to say, in the modern times, migration has been unidirectional—from lesser developed countries in Asia, Africa, Europe and South America to the more developed countries in Europe and North America.

Due to the massive development of the diaspora in the last century, the use of the term has been widening. Rogers Brubaker suggests that one element of this expansion in use "involves the application of the term diaspora to an ever-broadening set of cases: essentially to any and every nameable population category that is to some extent dispersed in space" (3). In the modern use of the term diaspora, the defining factor in the understanding of the term lies not in the nature of the exile, but in the fact that they cross borders to plant their feet in another land. It is not only confined to the narrow concept of border-crossing but encompasses the cultural transfiguration of boundaries and the reconstruction of national identities. These notions are closely interlinked with the immigrants' recollection of their homeland. Thus, the relationship that the immigrants share with the homeland comes into the forefront as it shapes the dynamics that come into play in the critical analysis of the diaspora.

According to Khachig Tölölyan:

Diasporas are emblems of transnationalism because they embody the question of borders, which is at the heart of any adequate definition of The Others of the nation-state. The latter always imagines and represents itself as a land, a territory, place that functions as the site of homogeneity, equilibrium, integration.... (6)

The very use of the concept 'homeland' undergoes a perspective shift when taken in the context of the diasporic communities, as Edite Nivo states, "A homeland need not necessarily be a physical place. It can just as well be a rhetorical territory meditated through language and sentiment" (qtd. in Mishra 93). The process of migration, irrespective of their nature, is often centered on negative experiences in terms of alienation, loss and isolation. The physical and emotional distance that separates them from the homeland thus colours their viewpoint with nostalgia, which often results in a romanticized and idealized conception of it: "The 'homelands' people reconstruct tends to be fictive communities, part real, part imagined" (Rayaprol 2). In the same vein, Salman Rushdie writes, "we will not be capable of reclaiming precisely the thing that was lost;...we will, in short, create fictions, not actual cities or villages, but invisible ones, imaginary homelands..." (10).

As flawed and biased as it is, the immigrants' construct of homeland is essential as it functions as a constituting basis of a collective diasporic identity. Individuals in a given diasporic community are banded together by their collective memory and shared remembrance of the past. Language, food and cultural practices serve as mediators that bridge the emotional distance between the homeland and the host country, and the shared experience of alienation and isolation in the host country results in a sense of community among these transplants. Through this, the very notion of homeland is reconstituted and interpreted, leading to the creation of a diaspora that transcends the limited process of immigration.

The trauma of dislocation, whether the exile is forced or voluntary, necessitates the immigrants to carry the baggage of their homeland when they relocate, and in what William

Safran calls “myth of return” (1991), this often translates into a hope that they will return to the homeland one day. For the first generation immigrants, their identity is still firmly entrenched in the culture of the land they left behind and by default, they are viewed as others by natives of their adopted countries. The presumed differences between the immigrants and the natives that emanate from both sides result in a sense of alienation as they do not identify with the values and traditions of the land of their exile. Social and economic aspirations may have led them to their places of exile, but their cultural identity is still firmly rooted in the places they left behind.

As strong as the desire is to remain connected to the homeland, the physical absence from it renders the desire for assimilation just as inevitable. It is a basic human tendency to seek belongingness wherever a person’s physical presence is located. In her book *Writing Diaspora: South Asian Women, Culture and Ethnicity* (2005), Yasmin Hussain states:

Diaspora as a sociological concept takes account of a ‘homing desire’-that is a need for belonging to an identity rooted in a geographical origin- as opposed to simply a desire for a ‘homeland’ in the sense of returning to, possessing or reconquering a physical territory. (7)

Thus, the diasporic communities exist in the realm between two conditions, i.e. the desire to maintain a relationship and connection with their homelands, and the desire to integrate and live as true citizens of their adopted countries. Due to this peculiar dichotomy, the diasporic communities/individuals become an amalgamation of different cultures and places. In *The Location of Culture* (1994), the cultural theorist Homi K. Bhabha defines this state as

‘Hybridity,’ in which identity is created out of multiple cultural forms, practices, beliefs and power dynamics.

While their connection with the homeland is meditated through their emphasis on the values, traditions and language of the place, the immigrants tend to seek acceptance in the new communities they are placed in. What this often leads to is a search for identity which ideally would marry the best of both worlds, thus allowing them to freely inhabit a space where they would be empowered to live out the true implications of their in-between identity. However, in reality, the search for identity is mostly painful and traumatic, as the cultural baggage from their homeland is often in conflict with the conditions of their everyday existence. In their situation, belongingness implies that they would have to shed one identity and embrace another world. Thus, these migrants can be said to exist in a state of ‘in betweenness’, as Salman Rushdie puts it:

The effect of mass migration has been the creation of radically new types of human being: people who root themselves in ideas rather than places, in memory as much as in material things; people who have been obliged to define themselves-because they are so defined by others-by their otherness; people in whose deepest selves strange fusions occur. (124)

Since the advent of the new millennium, the world has truly become a global village. The diasporic communities have gained acceptance and are more or less assimilated into their host countries. Moreover, these communities are gaining increasing prominence in their respective host countries in various fields such as politics, economics and literature. All these factors

contribute to the increasing interest in the diasporic experience, which in turn leads to an increase in the study of diasporic writings as a literary and cultural subject.

If the definition of diaspora is a group of people living in countries away from their homeland, then ‘diasporic writings’ would refer to the writings produced by these exiled communities. However, due to the rhizomic nature of diaspora itself, the writings of the diaspora can never be one dimensional: “Diasporic writing as a creative genre encapsulates the shared social and psychological preoccupations of whole dispersed generations and their offspring” (Hussain 3).

When diasporic writers write about their homelands, it is most often tinged with nostalgia. They strain to remember every last detail of the homes and lives they leave behind. Since the details of their homelands are recalled from memory, they are essentially writing about the past and of things that have passed, as Jaydeep Chakrabarty states, “The diasporic tension is not only spatial (torn between nations/cultures) but also temporal (split between the past and the present)” (31). Memory may not always be a reliable tool for recollecting the past because with the passing of time, memory becomes clouded, and the re-telling of lived experiences becomes a very subjective exercise. For them, writing about their homelands and their past is a way of grounding themselves. Moreover, even when the condition of their exile is voluntary, they still feel an affinity and connection with the places of their origin. Thus, writing about these places and their experience in said places is a way for them to maintain this connection.

On the other hand, when writers write about their experience in their host countries, they are examining and evaluating the news conditions of their experience, as Gabriel Sheffer puts it,

“complex, triadic relationship between ethnic diasporas, their host countries and homelands” (1). When writing about experiences in new and unfamiliar countries, the sense of displacement and alienation are even more pronounced than when writing about the homelands.

For the diasporic writers, the process of writing about their experience in the new country is basically a process of the search for identity, and also an attempt to define their place in the world. This search for identity and ‘home’ then becomes a common theme in the writings of the diaspora: “It is within this literature that diaspora is used as a social and political tool for expressing immediate grievances, those of which are immediately concerned with identity and quest for individuality” (Hussain 3).

Writers of the Indian diaspora occupy a unique space in the spectrum represented by different diasporic communities around the world. Each community has its own dynamics and concerns since the experiences that shape their understanding of their past and present vastly differ due to diverse employment and marriage practices, for example. Indian writers like Anita Desai, Bharati Mukherjee, Amitav Ghosh, Vikram Seth, Shashi Tharoor, Sunetra Gupta, Rohinton Mistry, and Hari Kunzru have all made their names while residing abroad. These non-resident Indian writers have explored the peculiar conditions of their existence through their creative works, and these works become sites where the major tensions and conflicts that define their exilic condition are given a voice. In the process, these writers contribute greatly in the inclusion of diasporic themes, particularly that of the Indian experience, in the mainstream literary dialogue.



Born to first generation Indian immigrants, Jhumpa Lahiri's stories tell the lives of Indians in exile, of people navigating between the traditions they've inherited and the confusing world they must encounter every day. Even though Lahiri's stories navigate a narrow channel demarcated by her regional and specific identity concerns, they possess what all the great works of literature do, i.e. universal expressions of human emotions, irrespective of the context. The search for belongingness and personal identity is by no means exclusive to those individuals who have crossed national borders. Jhumpa Lahiri explores themes of love, family, loss and longing in her works, and these are themes which cannot be solely attached to a limited socio-cultural milieu: "The expressions in Jhumpa's works are replete with images of loss and longing. The narratives are necessarily the narratives of pain" (Das 2013: ix). Coupled with her natural gift for storytelling, these factors combine to make Lahiri one of the most poignant writers to emerge out of the Indian diaspora.

*Interpreter of Maladies* consists of stories that are not confined to the diasporic experience, as Lahiri also writes about the experience of Indians at home. The two stories that are set in India, "The Real Durwan" and "The Treatment of Bibi Halder" tell of people in transition, who are searching for a home both literally and figuratively. The former tells the story of a homeless *durwan* who is thrown out of the building she resides in because of a deed she has no part in, while the latter consists of a mentally ill woman who is ostracized by her family because of her condition. The two women have never set foot outside the city, let alone the country. Yet, the themes of alienation, loss and search for identity still run rampant across these two stories.

In *Interpreter of Maladies*, Jhumpa Lahiri also employs a perspective other than that of the immigrants'. Since Lahiri herself is a second generation Indian-American, she has a detailed insight into the dynamics that come into play in the construction of the West's perception of her culture. Thus, bringing in a fresh and distant viewpoint offers clarity into the process of cultural construction in a foreign country which may not always be possible with a narrow immigrants' viewpoint. In the story "Sexy," a young American woman named Miranda is offered a disjointed and often contradictory view of Indian culture. Her interest is piqued by her affair with a married Indian man. She recalls a childhood memory when an Indian family in her neighbourhood had to endure racist taunts, and she remembers how alienated and isolated the family was from the rest of the neighbourhood. Miranda's affair with Dev is played out against the backdrop of her Indian coworker Laxmi's melodramatic tales of her cousin's sufferings due to a husband's infidelity. Miranda's experience of Indian culture is then fragmented and inconsistent - from the alienation of her former neighbours, to a lover who is brazen enough to string her along in an extra-marital affair, and finally to Laxmi's cousin who represents the stereotypical Indian wife whose happiness and self-worth revolves around her husband. However, this picture also presents a united front as it is representative of the multifaceted nature of the Indian identity. This serves to counter the often one dimensional view of the West towards an unfamiliar culture. At the end of the story, a young boy tells Miranda that sexy is loving someone you don't know (107), reiterating the point that it is almost impossible to know a culture when it is viewed from a distance.

Apart from the aforementioned stories, the rest of the stories in *Interpreter of Maladies* deal with first and second generation Indians in their adopted country as well as in India, as they

attempt to reconcile their inherited beliefs with their everyday reality. In “A Temporary Matter,” an electrical outage forces married couple Shoba and Shukumar to confront their unspoken pain over the loss of a child. The outage is reminiscent of power cuts in Calcutta during their visits, while the Indian food they prepare brings back memories of their shared traditional upbringing. For the couple, their shared past and memories afford them the foundation to construct a semblance of home amidst their crumbling relationship, as Mridul Bordoloi puts it, “the focus is on home as an interstitial space of resistance where discursive strategies are adopted to delocate the self from his/her remembered past” (30).

In ‘When Mr. Pirzada Came to Dine,’ a Bangladeshi man from Dhaka becomes a regular dinner guest at the home of a Bengali family in America. The narrator, a young girl named Lilia whose house Mr. Pirzada visits, struggles to understand the complexity of national and cultural identity. She is perplexed by the difference in nationalities between her parents and Mr. Pirzada because for her, “the singleness of their entity” (Begum 109), which is exhibited by their common language and customs is what’s most striking about them. The story illustrates the deep rootedness of cultural identity that defies national borders.

In the title story “Interpreter of Maladies,” an Indian tour guide accompanies an American family who are on vacation in India visiting the Konark temple. The employment of a rustic local as the narrator of the story serves to highlight the disconnection of the American family from their ancestral land. The story is set in Odisha and “Lahiri perhaps intends to posit that the feeling of dislocation is not entirely rooted when one is culturally displaced but might be experienced anywhere, even in one’s home of nostalgia” (Bordoloi 32). The very Americanized Mina Das is far removed from the traditions of her parents’ homeland yet feels a connection with

Mr. Kapasi because for her, 'home' "becomes a site where she is tormented with guilt and pain..." (ibidem 33). For this reason, she is drawn towards the otherness of the Indian guide as she attempts to delocate herself from her notion of home.

In 'Mrs. Sen,' eleven year old Eliot begins staying with Mrs. Sen - a university professor's wife - after school. Mrs. Sen would chop and prepare food as she tells Eliot stories of her past life in Calcutta. She attempts to relocate her idea of home in an unfamiliar setting by replicating activities that are part of her memory, like chopping vegetables and preparing fish. Food is an important signifier of nostalgia for immigrants, and it is a trope that Lahiri uses so often in her works, as Laura Ahn Williams states, "Food preparation becomes a way Mrs. Sen can construct her own identity and assert her subjectivity outside of any prescribed role as a newly immigrated spouse" (73).

The last story in the collection titled 'The Third and Final Continent' is a story of triumph in the midst of painful cultural relocation. The narrator, a Bengali man from Calcutta, moves to London as a student and lives with several other Bengali bachelors in a cramped house. He then moves to America where he initially rents a room in the house of a 103-year-old woman named Mrs. Croft. After marrying a woman his parents chose for him, they move into a new house and start building a new life in another country. In contrast to the often painful depictions of the immigrant condition in other stories, "The Third and Final Continent" abounds with optimism and positivity, both from the narrator as well as the host country.

In 2003, Lahiri published *The Namesake*, her first novel. Bhagabat Nayak comments that she "makes the text a cultural hyper-text," and she "faithfully portrays the trauma of cultural dislocation, displacement, homelessness and immigrancy..." (135).

In *The Namesake*, the experiences of first and second generation immigrants in their adopted country are contrasted, and it is in this vein that “intergenerational friction” (Pattanayak 20) becomes one of the most important themes in the novel.

*The Namesake* chronicles the lives Indian-born parents Ashoke and Ashima who immigrated as young adults to the United States where they raise their two children, and attempt to navigate the values of their homeland as well as their adopted country. Burdened with intense homesickness, Ashima struggles through language and cultural barriers and she dreads having her child in America without the support of her family. When their son was born, they decide to let Ashima’s grandmother name him. However, the letter with their son’s name never arrives from Kolkata. The boy is given a pet name as is customary in Bengali culture. Ashoke chooses the name Gogol in honor of the famous Ukrainian author Nikolai Gogol.

As Gogol starts kindergarten, his parents enroll him as Nikhil at school. However, the confused five year old objects, and his teacher decides to let him keep the name Gogol. As Gogol gets older, he resents his name more and more for its oddness and the strange genius for whom he was named. Shortly before leaving for college, his parents grudgingly allows Gogol to legally change his name to Nikhil Ganguli.

When Gogol starts college in Yale rather than following his father’s footsteps to MIT, he grows distant, and the rejection of his pet name becomes symbolic in creating barriers between him and his family. He resents the connection that his parents maintain with a land so unfamiliar to him and longs to shed that part of his identity. Moreover, Gogol’s struggle with having two names, one exclusive to his family and the other to the rest of the world, becomes a far-reaching metaphor for his search for identity in the novel. The possession of two names is reminiscent of

Jhumpa Lahiri's own experience. She states, "I'm like Gogol in that my pet name inadvertently becomes my good name" (Houghton Mifflin). Moreover, she contends, "It's almost too perfect a metaphor...having divided identity, divided loyalties, etc." (ibidem).

When Ashoke suddenly dies of a heart attack, Gogol begins the slow process of getting acquainted with his family and the culture he has grown distant from. He breaks up with her American girlfriend and spends more time with his family. Although Gogol generally disassociates with the traditions that mean so much to his parents, he ends up marrying a Bengali woman that his mother choose for him. When the marriage ends in a divorce due to Moushumi's infidelity, Gogol has come to peace with the duality of his identity.

In 2008, Jhumpa Lahiri's second collection of short stories *Unaccustomed Earth* was published. The book focuses on the experience of second generation Bengalis and reveals "a yawning gap between two generations" (Biswas 104).

In the title story of the book, Ruma who marries an American named Adam is pregnant with her second child. She has given up on her job as a lawyer after the family moves to Seattle. Coupled with the recent loss of her mother, the relocation gives rise to a sense of alienation and loneliness in her. She has always seen her mother as slightly obnoxious in her steadfast adherence to the values and traditions of her homeland. However, her new experience of isolation gives Ruma a new insight into her mother's life, and she feels guilty about the very American upbringing of her son.

"Hell-Heaven" demonstrates the loneliness and isolation of the immigrant experience when the narration's mother, a stereotypical Bengali wife, forms a deep bond with a young

bachelor. For years, Usha's mother happily feeds Pranab, reminiscing with him about their favorite Indian music and culture. In her husband's absence, the girl's mother falls in love with Pranab, and cherishes his visits. While such attraction would be incomprehensible in a different setting, the physical and emotional distance from her homeland affords her the audacity to indulge in such means to combat her loneliness.

In "A Choice of Accommodations," Amit returns to the boarding school where he spent his teenage years to attend the headmaster's daughter's wedding. He is accompanied by his American wife, Megan. The couple has left their daughters in the care of Megan's mother. Amit misses the girls; Megan does not. The getaway that was intended to be romantic serves to demonstrate the subtle differences in the inherent values and beliefs of the couple.

In 'Nobody's Business,' Sang, a second generation Bengali woman is fielding telephone calls from Indian suitors who have acquired her number from the vast Cambridge Bengali network, but is quickly rendered pathetic by her love for a selfish man. Unlike her counterpart in other stories, Sang is not encumbered with cultural baggage and is completely removed from notable signifiers of race or culture. She is placed into a very American world with her roommates, and the story remarkably does not feature any family or friends that would remind Sang of her roots. The story is instead fixed on the multiplicity of reality which is painful, difficult, and often unresolved.

The second half of *Unaccustomed Earth*, "Hema and Kaushik," is comprised of three interlinked stories: "Once in A lifetime," "Year's End," and "Going Ashore." The first story is

narrated by Hema, speaking to Kaushik, the second by Kaushik, responding to Hema, “Going Ashore” bringing them together.

The children of Bengali immigrants, Hema and Kaushik have known each other since childhood. Kaushik’s family moves back to India, losing contact with Hema’s parents. They reappear in America years later, staying in Hema’s parent’s house until they can find a house. Hema’s parents are shocked by their old friends, who wear American clothing, sneak cigarettes, and have an open bottle of Johnnie Walker nearby at all times. Hema has a crush on the teenaged Kaushik after he confides that his mother is dying of breast cancer.

“Year’s End” is narrated by Kaushik, as he addresses Hema. He is away at college when his father remarries a young widow with two small daughters. His lifelong passion for photography becomes his lifework: he travels the world, photographing war, famine, devastation of all kinds. When coincidence brings Hema and Kaushik together in “Going Ashore,” the stories thread together. They spend a passionate few days in Italy where Kaushik asks Hema to follow him to Hong Kong. She refuses, as her wedding to an Indian man is already arranged. They go their separate ways- Hema to Calcutta where she marries Navin and Kaushik to Phuket for a holiday. The story ends in a bittersweet note as the pregnant Hema mourns the death of Kaushik in the 2004 tsunami.

The declaration that Lahiri is preoccupied with diasporic tensions in her works does not imply that she faithfully portrays a single unified ‘diasporic problem.’ Since the process of crossing national and cultural boundaries is riddled with unimaginable complexities depending on contextual circumstances, reaction to the process would also be multidimensional. There are



differences, some subtle and some forthright, in the experience of immigrants when they are confronted with cultural variations, and Lahiri has been able to capture the nuances and subtleties of such varied experiences in her works.

The most glaring divide in the diasporic experience is found in the divide between the first generation and second generation immigrants. Bhagabat Nayak argues that Jhumpa Lahiri “essentialises culture and its importance in immigrant experience with a humanist outlook,” and “consciously foregrounds the merits of native culture and the mysteries of acquired culture...” (133). As they have lived part of their lives in the countries of their origin, first generation immigrants never feel at home in their new country. Since immigration in the modern times is often driven by economic factors, the host country remains a place to improve their economic condition and give their children better opportunities. For this group of immigrants, all their identities and sense of self are rooted in their homelands. In spite of their displaced condition, they strive to keep their traditions alive.

Their children who are born as citizens of the host countries, and who have inculcated the values and ideas of these countries are exposed to their roots by their parents and more often than not, traditional values are forced upon them by the first generation immigrants. Their comprehension of the homeland is handed down to them by their parents and is secondhand in a manner of speaking. Hence, the sense of rootlessness and the frantic search for identity are even more prominent for these children of first generation immigrants.

The second generation immigrants have internalized the values of their country of birth through schooling and their interactions with their peers who are natives of the country.

However, the values that they have inculcated from the country of their birth are often in opposition with the traditional values handed down to them by their parents. This leads to confusion and a desperate search for their place in the world. On one hand, their rootlessness affords them the freedom to live as citizens of the world, free to strike down roots anywhere they want to. On the other hand, their sense of loyalty and duty passed on to them by the elders bind them to places that they have little or no recollection of.

In her essay "Foodways and Subjectivity in Jhumpa Lahiri's *Interpreter of Maladies*," Laura Ahn Williams quotes Gayatri Gopinath who states, "the centrality of [male-male or father-son] trope as the primary trope in imagining diaspora invariably displaces and elides female diasporic subjects" (5). She also notes that Lahiri's stories "highlight the elided female diasporic subject" (ibidem 75). The focus on women characters in her works reveals another dimension of the diasporic experience—that of the unique experience of women, especially the first generation immigrants.

Jhumpa Lahiri's portrayal of diasporic subjects and her focus on women's experience in the diaspora place her in a spectrum consisting of female writers from South Asia who concern themselves with South Asian women's journey in a new country. Lahiri's contemporaries in that setting include female writers like Monica Ali, Bharati Mukherjee, Bapsi Sidhwa, Anita Desai and Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni. Although these women articulate themes of dislocation, alienation and culture shock in their respective works, their treatment of the negotiation of identity that their female diasporic subjects undergo in the new country differs, some subtle and some forthright.

In her study of South Asian female writers of the diaspora, Yasmin Hussain recognizes echoes of the “New Woman” in the works of women writers studied by her. She states:

The protagonists within these novels are New Women because they recognise themselves as individuals, and choose a strategy, no matter what the outcome, to overcome the pressure to conform to the role or category others want to see them enact. (54)

She further argues, “Women are often projected in Indian women’s fiction as trapped in the categories of wife, mother and daughter (ibidem 55). She then states that writers who portray these New Women “documented dissatisfaction with the cultural and sexual roles assigned to women through the issues raised in their stories and the protagonists’ characteristics, evoking their internal psychic turmoil” (ibidem 55-56).

In Jhumpa Lahiri’s stories, strains of this New Woman are found in second generation Indian women like Hema from *Unaccustomed Earth*, Moushumi from *The Namesake* and Sang from “Nobody’s Business.” These women possess characteristics that are indicative of a modern, empowered woman. They are financially independent, in-charge of their own choices and are more or less not confined to traditional gender roles. However, the first generation women immigrants in Lahiri’s stories are encumbered with the expectations that their traditional upbringing demands of them. Even so, for this generation of immigrants, the question of a new empowered identity that is enabled by the individual freedom afforded by the country of their exile takes on a new meaning due to their perception of the native culture.

Among her contemporaries who write about the diasporic experience, Jhumpa Lahiri is most often categorized together with Monica Ali, as many parallels can be found between the two authors and their respective works. While Lahiri was born to Bengali parents who migrated to England before she was born, Ali was born in Dhaka, Bangladesh to a Bangladeshi father and an English mother. The family was then forced out of Bangladesh during the War of Liberation in 1971, and they relocate to England when Ali was only three or four years old. Moreover, Lahiri's first novel *The Namesake* and Ali's novel *Brick Lane* were both published in 2003. Most importantly, both authors are concerned with the experience of women who are transplanted to a new country after marriage. Both novels were adapted into successful films and the two writers become two of the two recognizable faces of the South Asian diasporic literary scene.

*In Brick Lane*, an eighteen year old Bangladeshi woman named Nazneen is married off to a man twenty years her senior. Her husband takes her to London and the couple settles down in a sprawling Bangladeshi ghetto called Brick Lane. Upon her arrival in England, Nazneen struggles to adjust to a new country, but tries to settle for an existence as a traditional wife and mother. However, her interactions with various people who do not conform to established norms ignite a desire to take control of her life. As Chanu, Nazneen's husband, feels that he is losing control over his wife and daughters, he decides that that the only way to save his family is to take them back to Bangladesh. This finally causes Nazneen to stand up against her husband for the first time and declares that she would be staying on in London with her two daughters.

Unlike Lahiri's stories, *Brick Lane* heavily features the complex dynamics of gender discrimination, as Nazneen is forcibly confined at the insistence of her husband. He tells her,

“Why should you go out? If you go out, ten people will say, ‘I saw her walking on the street.’ And I will look a fool. Personally, I don’t mind if you go out but these people are so ignorant. What can you do?” (30). Moreover, the marginalized characters in the novel, including Nazneen, are victims of social discrimination on account of their race. The novel chronicles Nazneen’s long journey towards self-realization, and the search for identity documented therein is deeply connected to the protagonist’s assertion of her individuality in the face of oppression and discrimination.

Another diasporic writer who parallels Jhumpa Lahiri in terms of subject matter and theme is the Indian writer Bharati Mukherjee. Like Lahiri, she is of Bengali origin, although she only moved to America after earning her Master’s degree from University of Baroda in India. Mukherjee has published eight novels and four collections of short stories. She has also written a number of non-fiction books. In her novels like *A Tiger’s Daughter* (1971), *Wife* (1975) and *Jasmine* (1989), she writes about Indian women who migrate to America, and these stories chronicle their journey in that country.

*Jasmine* tells the story of a poor peasant woman from Hasnapur in Punjab who arrives in America as an illegal immigrant. Her husband Prakash was killed by a bomb in India while they were making plans to move to Florida. Jyoti, called Jasmine by Prakash, continues the journey even after her husband’s death, travelling by plane, train and ship. Upon her arrival in America, Jasmine survives on the fringes of American society, moving from job to job. At the age of twenty four, the novel shows her living with her fifty three year old lover Bud Ripplemayer, and their adopted son Du in Baden, Iowa. By then, she is known by the name Jane.

Unlike Nazneen in *Brick Lane* and the first generation women in Jhumpa Lahiri's stories, Jasmine is driven by her own determination and will to move to a foreign country. In *Jasmine*, the protagonist is an assimilated individual who is willing to go to extreme lengths to integrate herself into American society. In this regard, the possession of several names becomes a metaphor for her fluid identity, and she is willing to adapt to her changing circumstances. At the end of the novel, while she is leaving Bud's house to start another chapter of her life, she says, "Watch me reposition the stars" (240). This statement testifies to Jasmine's determination to be in-charge of her own fate. She is a self-made woman who survives in the midst of unimaginable adversities.

Jhumpa Lahiri, Monica Ali and Bharati Mukherjee are all women, writing about the trials and tribulations of immigrant women in the country of their exile. These writers deal with the question of identity in their respective works. Since their stories are set in a multicultural setting, this question becomes a complex notion that finds varied expressions with different characters. For Nazneen and Jasmine, their journey towards individual identity is not confined to the assertion of ethnic identity. For them, the presence of oppression in terms of gender discrimination and racism, as well as their personal struggles, necessitate the adoption of a fluid and adaptable identity that serves their needs in the changing socio-cultural environment.

In Jhumpa Lahiri's fiction, since the dynamics of racism and discrimination does not come into play, the tensions that are manifested in the first generation women immigrants stem from their attempt at upholding traditional values and culture in an environment that is so different from the one they grew up in. Thus, Lahiri's women characters like Ashima and Mala

are cultural survivors in a multicultural diasporic setting. The question of identity in these stories is not as much about journey of self-realization as it is about the assertion of ethnic identity.

The definition and understanding of the term Diaspora has slowly widened to include not only historically displaced people but a whole array of population and groups that are dispersed from their country of origin. William Safran states:

Today, “diaspora” and, more specifically, “diaspora community” seem increasingly to be used as metaphoric designations for several categories of people - expatriates, expellees, political refugees, alien residents, immigrants, and ethnic and racial minorities tout court. (83)

This metaphoric designation of diaspora is often criticized by scholars, including Safran himself, who worry that the term would lose all meaning.

At the advent of the twentieth century, the end of colonialism facilitates huge movements of people looking for better opportunities in the more developed Western countries. Due to this, diaspora as a subject of critical study is deeply entrenched in postcolonial discourse because the consolidation of diasporic communities takes place in the postcolonial environment. Consequently, the endeavor to study diaspora is a relatively new process that gains traction in recent times. Writings that come out of these consolidated diasporic communities too mainly came into focus in the postcolonial world.

As a result of the relative newness of the subject matter at hand, the interest in this literature is often concerned with the interactions of varied cultural practices and values in a

diasporic setting. The position where transnational transplants often find themselves, falling between cultures and nations, produces interesting dilemmas, and these are the issues that postcolonial thinkers like Homi Bhabha attempt to theorize in their works. Similarly, in a study of diasporic literature, focus is often given to the multicultural aspect of the writings.

Since Jhumpa Lahiri is first and foremost identified as a diasporic writer, her works tend to be studied and analyzed as manifestation of the tensions that accompany those individuals that straddle multiple cultures. Thus, issues like trauma, hybridity, assimilation and the ubiquitous search of identity are often the focus of studies related to Lahiri's works. These concerns are indeed found in Lahiri's stories, mostly in second generation immigrants who must navigate between their traditional upbringing and the very modern environment of the new country.

However, the first generation women immigrants in Lahiri's fiction exhibit contra-acculturation tendencies due to the deep-rootedness of their traditional beliefs and values. As a result, what is often considered as universal diasporic tensions may not always find purchase in the lives of these female characters. The nuances of the diasporic experience that concern the experience of first generation women in Lahiri's fiction has the potential to be ignored in favor of identifying universal problems that confront diasporic individuals. Therefore, the complex interplay of traditions, exclusivity and cultural agencies that results in the contra-acculturation seen in the first generation immigrant women in Jhumpa Lahiri's narratives is an issue that warrants a wider study.

The divide in the experiences between men and women in Jhumpa Lahiri's fiction stems mainly from the reasons of their exile. The men in these stories undertake the journey driven by



their ambitions and hope for a better life. The women, on the other hand, are often reluctant to leave their homes, and this is clearly illustrated in “The Third and Final Continent” from *Interpreter of Maladies*. In the story, the narrator is driven by ambition to leave his home country, endure crippling poverty and difficulties, and finally to build a new life in another country. His wife, however, arrives because her parents choose to send her to live in an unfamiliar country with a stranger in order to save her from a life of spinsterhood.

Moreover, most of the first generation women in Lahiri’s stories are raised in middle class Bengali homes where tradition precedes other concerns in many aspects of life. In these families, the members, especially females, are expected to uphold traditional values passed on to them by their parents.

Indu Swami writes, “Traditionally, a ‘good woman’ is always synonymous with good wife and a good wife must be chaste, faithful and virtuous like *Sita* or *Savitri*. In the Hindu society, the ideal woman has been personified by *Sita*” (3). In the Hindu mythologies, *Sita* and *Savitri* embody self-sacrifice and wifely devotion. The interpretation of an ideal woman as embodying qualities of unquestionable devotion, docility and chastity contributes abundantly to shaping the traditional construction of Indian femininity, permeating through all Indian cultures, including Bengali culture. Women in traditional Indian cultures are conditioned to accept and subscribe to these notions of femininity, defining their identity in relation to the qualities that construct the ideals of Indian womanhood.

The first generation immigrant women in Jhumpa Lahiri’s narratives are brought up in a traditional society where they internalize what their patriarchal upbringing demands of them as

women, and it is these values and ideals that they carry with them when they relocate to a new country.

In Jhumpa Lahiri's, narratives, women occupy a secondary position to men and fulfill the roles assigned to them by the traditional construct of gender roles. In the last story of *Interpreter of Maladies* titled "The Third and Final Continent," the narrator's new wife carry her notions of womanly qualities such as devotion and chastity with her even after arriving in America, waiting on her husband and refusing to remove her *pallu* even at his request. Ruma's mother in "Unaccustomed Earth" boxes herself in her ideals of wifely devotion, taking pride in waiting on her husband. Ashima too resigns herself to the role of a mother and wife, channeling her energy into giving her children a proper Indian upbringing in a foreign land.

In the new country, the immigrant women lead a confined existence characterized by domesticity. They hardly venture outside of their homes and the bonds they form are with other Bengalis, mostly brought on by shared experience of exile. Hence, the opportunity to expose themselves to American lifestyles and outlook which would broaden their biased view of the country is limited by their confined existence. Combined with their traditional upbringing, this confinement results in a resistance to change and assimilation for the first generation women immigrants in Lahiri's stories.

A major conflict that arises in the study of diaspora is the search for identity that is profoundly manifested in second and third generation immigrants. Their connection with a culture or land they have little experience of alienated them from their current environment, spurring them into a frantic search for belongingness. The women in Jhumpa Lahiri's narratives

however, firmly root their identity in the values and traditions of their homeland and thus do not succumb to this crisis that plagues the diasporic community. Therefore, in a sense, isolation from their adopted homeland's social and cultural milieu frees them from possible tensions brought about by their transnational and transcultural existence.

Homi Bhabha contends that diasporas exist in the interstices between nations and cultures and it is in this liminal gap that identities are negotiated and reconstituted. When a belief or practice is transplanted from one culture to another in what Bhabha calls "cultural translation," values and meanings get reconstituted. Moreover, Yasmin Hussain states, "Cultural identity is fluid, produced and reproduced so that it often results in "hybrid" forms of expression" (6). These notions of identity formation stems from the understanding that identity, especially in a diasporic setting is negotiable, taking on new aspects while giving up others. In a diasporic setting, when an individual is faced with the trauma of dislocation, the resulting alienation and isolation would drive the immigrants towards acculturation where they would embrace and adopt the ethos of the dominant culture. Acculturation serves the purpose of not only countering the pangs of homelessness, it also entails a marriage between two differing cultures which would then become a new breeding ground for new cultural identities-a hybrid identity.

However, a study of Lahiri's fictional characters, especially women, fails to validate some of the central postulates of Bhabha's critical paradigm. It is probable that Bhabha's insightful reading of postcolonial situations in general is not sufficiently addressing a problematic area, specifically of women's experience in the similar diasporic situation. The study of Lahiri's female immigrant characters indicates that cultural translation serves to magnify the

significance of their inherited beliefs and practices in their new social and cultural milieu, while making them resistant to change. Following Bhabha's position and similar other postcolonial paradigms, it is supposed that cultural and national identity is fluid and negotiable for male characters as well as female. However, the women in Lahiri are found resistant to the enabling capacities of their new land. So the identity question to be negotiated by the first generation immigrant Bengali women in Lahiri's fiction is complexly connected with their new adopted homeland as well as with the life and custom of their native land. Thus, the critical endeavor of situating women in the diasporic narrative of Jhumpa Lahiri is essentially a study of the complex networks that define the process of identity formation for these women.

In the process of cultural negotiation in a diasporic setting, an individual can integrate himself/herself into the host country and adopt an identity that takes generously from both the native and host culture, resulting in a hybrid form of identity. On the other hand, the same process can have an opposite effect. Contra-acculturation takes roots in other individuals in the same setting when exposure to another culture only evokes a desire to preserve an unadulterated and pure identity derived solely from the culture of the native land. Thus, it is at this extreme end of the spectrum that the first generation women immigrants in Jhumpa Lahiri's stories find themselves in.

When these women are faced with alienation, homesickness and isolation, they assert their individual and national identities by taking "refuge in their native culture as an antidote or moral/spiritual resource to checkmate their decentered consciousness" (Nayak 132).

The Western world's general perception of Indian culture and traditions as detrimental to women's freedom and their expression of individuality imply that the internalization of the host country's more liberal attitude would empower these immigrant women to break free of the shackles of gender norms and expectations. However, the resolute upholding of traditional values in the midst of immense pressure distorts the very understanding of empowerment. In the rejection of Western liberalization, these women empower themselves to become the carriers of their culture and the agencies that solidify the diasporic communities they are placed in.

In the attempt at situating women in Jhumpa Lahiri's narrative, the first necessity lies in examining the ideals of Indian womanhood. Since the immigrant women's comprehension of identity is firmly connected to the values and ideals that they imbibe in the home country, understanding the intricate dynamics of social, religious and historical process that construct the position and images of women in India would felicitate a more nuanced understanding of the reasons why Lahiri's women insists on rejecting the influence of their country of exile. In rooting their identity in the traditions and values of the homeland, the immigrant women distort the process of identity formation in a new country. Thus, the problem of identity for migrant Bengali women is intricately connected with the homeland and the women's perspective of the new country.

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## CHAPTER II:

### Examining the Ideals of Indian Womanhood

The position of women in India and the construction of Indian womanhood are complexly informed by social, religious and historical processes, as Rehana Ghadially states, “The roles women play in society and the images we have of them have developed not simply from the exigencies of biology and social situations but are rather deeply rooted in the myths and religion of the culture” (22). The statement is especially true of Indian society as established societal norms are largely dictated by the ideals prescribed in the Hindu religion, a faith that an overwhelming majority of the population professes. It seeps through every stratum of Indian society, structuring the very hierarchies that dictate the condition of living for its populace. Consequently, religion stands as the defining agent that shapes the construction of Indian womanhood.

The representation and construction of womanhood in Hinduism are informed by certain codes of conduct and ideals that are complex and often liable to controversial interpretations. The general perception towards the position of women in India, especially by the West, is that these codes of conduct or rules pertaining to women in Hindu religious texts are detrimental to women’s rights and freedom. In regard to this, one of the most cited texts that govern the role of women in Hinduism is Laws of *Manu* or *Manu Smriti* (c.1500 BCE) from the *Dharmasastra* (Right Code of Conduct). Selective lines from the text are often used to validate the relegation of Indian women to a position of inferiority and helplessness. Excerpts from a section dealing with the status of women read as follows:

By a young girl, by a young woman, or even by an aged one, nothing must be done independently, even in her own house.

In childhood a female must be subject to her father, in youth to her husband, when the lord is dead, to her sons; a woman must never be independent. (V 147-148 trans. Buhler)

In the same text, the duties of a wife are stated as thus:

Though destitute of virtue, or seeking pleasure (elsewhere), or devoid of good qualities, (yet) a husband must be constantly worshipped as a god by a faithful wife.

No sacrifice, no vow, no fast must be performed by women apart (from their husbands); if a wife obeys her husband, she will for that (reason alone) be exalted in heaven.

A faithful wife, who desires to dwell (after death) with her husband, must never do anything that might displease him who took her hand, whether he be alive or dead. (ibidem V 154-156)

A reading of these specifications indicates that in Indian society, women are irrevocably subjected men with little or no freedom of choice. However, in the same text, women are also held in a position of reverence:

Women must be honoured and adorned by their fathers, brothers, husbands, and brothers in-law, who desire (their own) welfare.

Where women are honoured, there the gods are pleased; but where they are not honoured, no sacred rite yields rewards.

The houses on which female relations, not being duly honoured, pronounce a curse, perish completely, as if destroyed by magic (ibidem III 55-58)

The seemingly contradictory views regarding women in *Manu Smriti* are reflective of the duality that exists in Hinduism's construction of the female. Susan Wadley states, "On one hand, the woman is fertile, benevolent-the bestower; on the other, she is aggressive, malevolent-the destroyer (24). She notes:

According to Hindu cosmology, if a female controls her own sexuality, she is changeable; she represents both death and fertility; she is both malevolent and benevolent. If, however, she loses control of her sexuality by transferring it to a man, she is consistently benevolent. (ibidem 28)

Thus, due to the destructive power that is supposedly yielded by women, they are equally feared and revered, as Prabhati Mukherjee states, "At one extreme, they are extolled as 'goddesses' and at the other root of all evils" (Preface). However, the aggressive aspect of the female has the tendency of being highlighted and because of this, the more popular interpretation of this duality, especially by patriarchal authorities, is that women must be controlled by men so that no harm may come from their power.

The propagation of selective contents from ancient texts like the *Manu Smriti* firmly established the Hindu society as a patriarchal one where women are subjugated to men. In a

patriarchal culture, the ideals and images of women are not women's creations and are not born out of their own experience. The interplay of social and religious convictions that have relegated them to a position of inferiority ensures that "women have lost the power of naming, of explaining and defining for themselves the realities of their own experience" (Ruth 84).

In Indian society, the images that constitute the ideals of womanhood are also derived from ancient religious texts. In regard to this, Jerome S. Bruner remarks, "In the mythology instructed community there is a corpus of images and models that provide the patterns that individuals may aspire, a metaphoric identity" (357). The epitome of an ideal Indian woman, the one that men hold up as a standard that women must strive to emulate, is that of *Sita* from the epic *Ramayana*. Swami Vivekananda, one of the most prominent teachers of Hinduism states, "She [*Sita*] is the very type of the true Indian woman, for all the Indian ideals of a perfected woman have grown out of that one life of *Sita*" (643).

In the *Ramayana*, the god *Rama* (avatar of *Vishnu*) wins *Sita's* hand in marriage when he is able to break the bow of *Shiva*, a condition set forth by her adoptive father *Janaka*. After the wedding, the couple returns to Ayodhya, which is ruled by *Rama's* father *Dasharatha*. When *Dasharatha* is compelled by *Rama's* stepmother to give the throne to her own son, *Rama* is banished to the forest for fourteen years. *Sita* willingly renounces the comforts of the palace to join her husband in exile. When *Rama* tries to persuade her not to follow, she implores that for a woman, her husband is her sole means of salvation.

*Sita* is then kidnapped by *Ravana* who kept her imprisoned for one year. *Ravana* makes his desire for her known, but she remains steadfast in her chastity and devotion to her husband.

Upon her eventual rescue, she is made to undergo a trial by fire to prove her innocence and chastity by her own husband. She is again banished to the forest while pregnant after *Rama's* subjects cast doubts upon her character. There, she gives birth to twin sons and lives a hermit life. Another trial by fire awaits her on her final return to Ayodhya. Unable to bear the constant shadows cast on her character, she calls on her mother, the earth, to take her back (Kakar 53-55).

The tale of *Sita* in the *Ramayana* has captured the hearts and imagination of millions of Hindus because through all the terrible fates that befall her, *Sita* remains devoted to her husband and vows to maintain her chastity. In a survey taken of one thousand young men and women in the Indian state of Uttar Pradesh, out of 24 goddesses, literary heroines and famous women of history, an overwhelmingly majority choose *Sita* as their ideal female role model (Sutherland 1). Thus, all the qualities that *Sita* is generally thought to demonstrate in the epic-devotion, chastity, purity, docility- are the virtues that women in India are expected to imbibe.

As widespread as it is, the act of singling out *Sita* as the perfect woman can be called into question due to the presence of other heroines and goddesses in Hindu texts. The omissions of other female icons like *Draupadi* from the other Hindu epic *The Mahabharata* and the goddess *Kali*, who are perceived as possessing traits of aggressiveness, a quality that does not align with the notion of femininity, speak of the importance placed on docility or submissiveness. Moreover, in her essay *Sita and Draupadi: Aggressive Behaviour and Female Role Models in the Sanskrit Epics* (1989), Sally J. Sutherland challenges the portrayal of *Sita* as self-sacrificing and docile. She studies *Valmiki's Ramayana* and points out that she is in fact flawed and vulnerable to baser instincts like selfishness and greed. She states,

The character of *Sita* is a complex figure, like Draupadi's. Sita's actions belie much of her idealized description...this carefully drawn figure is set against the more realistic *Sita*, one whose actions-such as her greed for the golden deer and her castigation of Laksmana are far from ideal. (76)

The propagation of selective aspects of religious texts to dictate the role and position of women in India can be said to be a product of patriarchal authorities who must ensure that women remain subjugated to them by internalizing qualities that are compatible with submissiveness and docility. Additionally, Partha Chatterjee notes, "a central element in the justification of British colonial rule was the criticism of the 'degenerate and barbaric' social customs of Indian people, sanctioned, or so it was believed, by their religious tradition" (1). Thus, the British government in India had the tendency to amplify the negative aspects of Indian culture and religion to serve their colonial agenda. Hence, the perception of the West towards Indian culture and religion is distorted and often colored by bias and prejudice. Nevertheless, the images and ideals prescribed in texts like *Manu Smriti* and *Ramayana* are the constructs that shape the understanding of womanhood in India.

The subjugation of women in patriarchal societies is a long and continuous process across most societies. In her seminal work *The Second Sex* (1949), Simone de Beauvoir attempts to trace the history of the subjugation of women going back to the pre-historic times in order to locate the process through which the hierarchy of sexes was established. In the pre agricultural times when humans were nomadic in nature, pregnancy, childbirth and menstruation reduced the women's capacity for work and made them at times wholly dependent upon the men for

protection and food. The domestic labours that fell to her lot because they were reconcilable with maternity cares imprisoned her in repetition and immanence, and they are perpetrated without change from century to century.

The subjugation of women at the hands of men across all human societies then pre-dates the advent of organized religion or even a semblance of societal structure. According to De Beauvoir, men and women are assigned two separate historical domains largely dependent on the binary of immanence vs. transcendence. Biology restricts the productivity of women thus confining them to a domain mainly characterized by domesticity. Men, on the other hand, transcended their animal nature. They did not limit themselves to hunting, fishing and fighting to survive. They invented tools, modes of transports and weapons to conquer the lot that was designated to him by default.

Simone De Beauvoir uses the term *Other* throughout *The Second Sex* to diagnose the female's secondary position in society as well as within her own patterns of thought. She states, "At the moment when man asserts himself as subject and free being, the idea of the Other arises" (79). Thus, in the binary of opposites, man is the subject and woman the object, as she continues, "She is called 'the sex', by which is meant that she appears essentially to the male as a sexual being...she is the incidental, the inessential as opposed to the essential. He is the subject, he is the absolute, she is the other" (16).

In relation to the position and images of women in India, religious ideologies work alongside historical factors and her own biology to establish fixed ideals that are unchanging through the ages. Subhadra Mitra Channa summarizes these ideals:

The *Devi* is a woman with a large *bindi* on her forehead, wearing a *saree* and fair in complexion. She is sexually passive, gentle and self-sacrificing, monogamous, looking upon the only man in her life, her husband, and she is the repository of the honour of the family. (37)

In her study of upper and upper middle class urban Bengali Hindu women, Manisha Roy writes about the customs and practices that she observes in the conditioning of young girls. She writes, “Some afternoons, she [the girl] may be summoned by one of the older aunts to read parts of the holy books such as *The Ramayana*, *The Mahabharata* or *The Puranas*” (32), so that “she will remember the great virtuous women of the epics” (ibidem 33). She continues, “The little girl should be made conscious of the traditions of the pious, tolerant and sacrificing women of her country. She should learn the virtue of being like them...” (ibidem).

Women in India are conditioned to imbibe these ideals right from childhood. They live sheltered lives under the control of a patriarchal figure in terms dictated by them. As a result, girls are painfully aware of the gender roles that are expected of them, and they carry these expectations to womanhood, through motherhood and finally to old age. Since the task of child rearing falls on women with little input from men, it is often the women themselves that reinforce gender norms on their daughters, and demand lofty standards that are compatible with the traditional understanding of the ideals that construct a perfect woman.

Children in India are generally not encouraged to seek independence when they reach a certain age. An Indian woman then moves directly from her father’s house to her husband’s, subsequently falling under a new kind of authority, namely her husband and in-laws. When these



women become mothers, they strive to impart their learned values to their daughters, thus creating a vicious circle with little hope for change. Susan Wadley states, “The ideal women are those who do not strive to break these bonds of control” (31). The life of a traditional Indian woman is mostly confined in domesticity and her chance of transcending the narrow gendered space she inhabits is severely limited by the same expectations that confine her to that space.

In her repertoire of works, Jhumpa Lahiri writes extensively about her own experience as a daughter of Indian immigrants. She also alludes to the struggles of her parents, friends, acquaintances, and others in the Bengali community in their travails in a new country. Since men are often preoccupied with jobs and other productive tasks in that setting, a girl growing up in a diasporic community would have most of her interactions with women-mothers and their children. It is perhaps due to this reason that women’s’ experience features predominantly in Lahiri’s works. Her stories vividly demonstrate the growing pains that are unique to women in an unfamiliar country, thus documenting a facet of diaspora that may have been overlooked in favour of identifying universal diasporic problems.

There is an intricate interplay of dynamics that shape the experience of women in their country of exile, and the most notable of these can be firmly traced back to the ideals that they have internalized in the home country. However, in these stories, it can be argued that the representation of Indian culture that is so deeply connected with the concept of ultimate liberation of the soul is vague, as religion is not mentioned explicitly in these stories. For a Hindu, the attainment of this liberation is aligned with the practices and customs that are encapsulated within Indian culture, and the steadfast adherence to these extend beyond the

assertion of national or cultural identity. As Lahiri grew up in America and has not fully immersed herself in the complex and rich culture found in India, it is probable that she too is influenced by the often distorted representation of Indian culture by the West, as Indira Nityanandam states, “As a woman writer, Lahiri repeatedly portrays the stereo-typical characteristics that male writers have universalized and ulogised” (105).

The first generation immigrant women in Jhumpa Lahiri’s narratives grew up in traditional societies where they imbibe what their patriarchal upbringing demands of them as women. Faced with intense homesickness, isolation and alienation, transnational migration only serves to magnify the significance of their inherited beliefs and practices. The uniqueness of women’s experience in the diaspora owes its origin to various factors, starting with the very reason of their exile.

Jhumpa Lahiri is preoccupied with capturing the nuances of the diasporic experience and not just a broad unified problem. As a result, her stories are peppered with different experiences depending on various factors, like conditions of exile and varied socio-economic situations. The most glaring difference, one that is often recounted and studied, is between the first generation immigrants and their offspring. With no lived experience of the culture and traditions they inherit from their parents, these children break away from the values that are so dear to their parents, often creating tension in these families.

A less obvious but equally significant difference observable in a similar diasporic setting is between the experiences of men and women, a conundrum that Jhumpa Lahiri captures beautifully in her stories. In these stories, the very nature of their respective exile is inherently

different. For the first generation men, crossing borders offers them a new life where they would have an opportunity to live a life better than the ones they have at home. Although they are also encumbered with the pangs of homesickness, their hope for a better future softens any residual yearning they may have for the lives they leave behind.

The women, on the other hand, often arrive in America as new brides- alone, confused and homesick. As they do not actively participate in activities outside their families or communities, they spend their time looking back at the life they left behind in Calcutta. Since arranged marriage is the norm in Hindu societies in India, they essentially move continents away from their families to live with a complete stranger. Coupled with the awkwardness of a newly married life, the feeling of alienation and loneliness increase exponentially for these immigrant women. With no emotional support to lessen the burden of homesickness, their connection with the homeland serves as an anchor that grounds them in a new environment. What this often entails is a steadfast adherence to inherited beliefs and traditions, values that they carry with them throughout their exile.

In *The Namesake*, a young Ashoke Ganguli meets a businessman named Ghosh on a train to Jamshedpur. In the course of the journey, the man tells Ashoke to “pack a pillow and a blanket and see as much of the world as you can” (16). When their train crashed later that night, Ghosh dies and Ashoke is left with grave injuries. While recovering, the dead man’s words made a lasting impression on him, and Ashoke has become aware of his confined existence in Calcutta. The novel comments, “He imagined not only walking, but walking away, as far as he could from the place in which he was born and in which he had nearly died” (ibidem 20). Thus, Ashoke’s

exile is self-imposed, and he is not burdened with a lingering sense of regret. Instead, he channels his energy into building a respectable life in his adopted country.

Ashoke's wife Ashima is compelled to start fresh in an unfamiliar country with a stranger while her family resides continents away. Unlike her husband whose pangs of homesickness are countered by his driving ambition in a new country, Ashima spends her days looking back at the life she left behind in Calcutta. Similarly, in "The Third and Final Continent" from *Interpreter of Maladies*, the narrator proudly recalls his journey, from a poor student in London to his present condition in America, and he states that his ambition drives him to carry on even in the most difficult of times. His wife, however, arrives because her parents had begun to fear that she would never marry" and married her off to a stranger halfway across the world "to save her from spinsterhood" (181).

In "Only Goodness" from *Unaccustomed Earth*, Rahul, the son of Indian immigrants in America, perfectly sums up his parents' exile as thus: "Baba left India to get rich, Ma married him because she had nothing else to do" (138).

Apart from the very reason of their migration, another significant dimension that needs to be considered in the study of the role that tradition plays in the lives of first generation women in Jhumpa Lahiri's stories is the family background of these women. In India, the established social hierarchy concerning gender roles is most profoundly manifested among the middle class and to some extent, the upper class. Subhadra Mitra Channa states, "Taking one look at the popular image of the Indian woman makes it clear that like the nation the woman is also a product of the

elite majority, namely the Hindu, middle class and upper class” (37). Among the lower class, economic compulsions diminish the demarcation between the two genders.

Due to its sheer mass, the expansive Indian middle class, mostly constituted by close-knit family units, can be considered as the agency that incorporates, solidifies and disseminates societal norms. In Lahiri’s stories, most of the first generation immigrant women are products of this influential class. For instance, Hema’s mother is the daughter of a clerk in Kolkata—a position that is representative of the Indian middle class. Kaushik’s stepmother in “Year’s End” is a schoolteacher, another signifier of this class. These women embody simplicity, chastity and obedience. These ideals are painstakingly imparted to them in their childhood homes, and when they are transplanted to another country, they have become impenetrable to the influences of another culture.

Although the core belief system that constructs the traditional notion of Indian womanhood remains intact through the ages, the modern Indian woman is a radical deviation from the idea of womanhood that originates from the *Sita* mould. However, first generation immigrant women in Jhumpa Lahiri’s stories grew up in a different time where traditional gender roles are even more rigid. *The Namesake* opens in 1968, as Ashima is about to give birth to her first child. Part Two of *Unaccustomed Earth* starts in 1974 when Hema was six years old. Understandably, the social environment then is incomparable to what it is now. Growing up in more socially rigid times, these women incorporate values that are compatible with their upbringing, and these are the same values that carry over to the new country.

Jhumpa Lahiri's stories are manifestations of the power that inherited traditions and values wield in shaping an Indian woman's perspective of the world. This is especially true of the first generation immigrant women as their physical location does very little to diminish the determination to strive for the ideals of a perfect wife that they have imbibed throughout their lives. Since their diasporic state is brought about by their marriage to men who are in self-imposed exile, the age old institution becomes a site where these appropriated values are exhibited.

The general conception of restrictive norms and practices is that they are perpetuated by males to ensure that the established hierarchy of sexes remains intact. However, in Lahiri's stories, men are not portrayed as oppressors and they do not impose rigid customs and practices on their spouses. Though the immigrant men in these stories are not fully comfortable with the influences of their adopted country, they are found to be more accommodative of their changing cultural milieu.

A prominent trait that is observable in traditional Indian societies is the preoccupation of parents with finding a suitable groom for their daughters, as Sudhir Kakar states, "To marry one's daughter off propitiously is considered one of the primary religious duties of Hindu parents (60). Moreover, in these societies, girls are often married off early to in order to preserve their chastity. In "The Third and Final Continent" from *Interpreter of Maladies*, the narrator's marriage to a woman named Mala is arranged by his older brother and wife. Having never met her before, he is told that his Mala could "cook, knit, embroider, sketch landscapes, and recite poems by Tagore... (181), indicating qualities that a good wife must possess. Similarly, in *The*

*Namesake*, nineteen year old Ashima is studying for a degree in English when she gets a marriage proposal from Ashoke's family. At the meeting, her mother extols her qualities as thus: "She is fond of cooking, and she can knit extremely well. Within a week she finished this cardigan I am wearing" (7). She is then asked to recite a few stanzas from the poem "The Daffodils." This episode in the novel further illustrates the expectations that bind Indian women to limited roles.

In "Mrs. Sen," the titular character's advertisement for the role of a babysitter reads: "Professor's wife, responsible and kind, I will care for your child in your home" (111). Later on, when she meets a prospective employer, she says by way of introduction, "Mr. Sen teaches mathematics at the university" (ibidem 112). Mrs. Sen's deference to her husband in favour of her own identity reinforces the skewed dynamic observed in an Indian marriage. In "Sexy," a Bengali husband's infidelity is described as "a wife's worst nightmare" (83), and it is revealed that the wife has become bedridden since the affair came to light. The slightly melodramatic reaction to the affair testifies to the totality of a wife's devotion and dependence on her husband.

Mala from "The Third and Final Continent" embodies the qualities of modesty, docility and submission that are expected of an Indian wife. Upon her arrival at the airport to join her husband in America, he describes her as thus:

The free end of her *sari* did not drag on the floor, but was draped in a sign of bridal modesty over her head, just as it had draped my mother until the day she died. Her thin brown arms were stacked with gold bracelets, a small red circle

was painted on her forehead, and the edges of her feet were tinted with a decorative red dye. (191)

Later, at the narrator's house, he tells her, "There is no need to cover your head...I don't mind. It doesn't matter here" (ibidem 192). He then remarks that she keeps it covered anyway.

In "Year's End" from *Unaccustomed Earth*, Chitra is described by her husband as "a bit old-fashioned" (264). A former schoolteacher from Kolkata, she marries Kaushik's father after her husband and the father of her two daughters dies. Her characteristics are seen through the eyes of the very Americanized Kaushik. Like Mala in "The Third and Final Continent," she too represents the stereotypical portrayal of a submissive Indian wife. She is docile, timid and at times, overbearing in her eagerness to please, making Kaushik uncomfortable.

Patriarchy, validated by religious norms, dictates that a married Indian woman must submit wholeheartedly to her husband without question. Thus, an Indian marriage comes with the implication of servitude on the part of the wife. A husband and wife can never be equals as the former would always precede the latter in terms of authority and importance. A wife is expected to wait on her husband and defer to him in all matters, irrespective of the importance. The ideals of womanhood set forth by the *Sita* model is the code that defines wifely conduct and thus they must embody devotion, chastity, docility and self-sacrifice. Since the marriage becomes such an important site where patriarchal authorities impose gender hierarchy, the ideal womanhood is deeply connected to wifhood, as Prabhati Mukherjee states, "it was rather an ideal wifhood, and not an ideal womanhood, that all these authorities were describing at great length (16).



Anne Z Mickelson asserts that women are “designed by nature to bear, nurture children and to act as her husband’s helpmate, help him to fulfill his potential, and resign herself to her limitation” (455). In traditional societies like India, this biological function is further reinforced by the patriarchal system, and motherhood essentially becomes the primary source of self-validation for women.

Since Lahiri’s narratives highlight the experience of women in a diasporic setting, mother-child relationship is extensively portrayed in these stories. Interestingly, the stories in *Unaccustomed Earth* like the title story, “Hell-Heaven” and “Once in a Lifetime” portray mother-daughter relationships which is opposite to the more common trope of favouring father-son relationships in India, as Irawati Karve states, “it is the parent-son rather than parent-daughter relationship which becomes charged with symbolic significance” (119). However, the statement is true of *The Namesake* because in the novel, Gogol’s name which becomes a metaphor for his search for identity is deeply intertwined with his father’s past.

For the first generation immigrant women in Jhumpa Lahiri’s stories, motherhood increases the feeling of alienation and isolation in a new country. This dichotomy is brought about by their knowledge that pregnancy and motherhood are treated with a certain reverence back home:

The tense, often humiliating relationships with the others in her husband’s family; her homesickness and sense of isolation; her identity confusion; the awkwardness of marital intimacy...with the anticipation of motherhood, this knot begins, almost miraculously, to be unraveled. (Kakar 65)

A woman's status in her marital home drastically changes once she becomes pregnant. Moreover, it is a common practice in India for pregnant women to return to their parental homes for birth for emotional support during this time. This practice also strengthens their bonds with their mothers and prepares them for the task of raising the child.

Deprived of this emotional support and companionship, pregnancy and motherhood become lonely endeavors for the diasporic women. Men are often not adequate substitutes for the support of female family members. The predicament that these women find themselves in leads to an intense feeling of homesickness, isolation and anxiety. In such a difficult time, their resolve to maintain uninterrupted ties with the traditions of their homeland becomes strengthened. In this manner, pregnancy and motherhood become yet other sites where their connection with their homeland is manifested.

The anxiety of women in such a situation is vividly illustrated in *The Namesake* as Ashima is about to give birth to her first child in America. She observes:

That it was happening so far away from home, unmonitored and unobserved by those she loved, had made it more miraculous still. But she is terrified to raise a child in a country where she knows so little, where life seems so tentative and sparse. (6)

After she gives birth to Gogol, her anxiety does not diminish and she tells her husband, "I'm saying I don't want to raise Gogol alone in this country. It's not right. I want to go back" (ibidem 33). Alone with the baby, she spends a lot of her time crying and being depressed, missing her family back home in India. Later on, the novel proceeds to compare her exilic state to pregnancy:

“For being a foreigner, Ashima begins to realize, is sort of a lifelong pregnancy—a perpetual wait, a constant burden, a continuing feeling out of sorts” (ibidem 49).

The feeling of loneliness and isolation owes much of its origin to boredom and listlessness. With her husband away at work, a woman is left to fend for herself at home. This is drastically different from the situation at home because in middle class homes in India, a married woman hardly has any time to herself as she is constantly surrounded by assorted family members. Moreover, familiarity with the neighbourhood ensures that she is never short of a companion should she ever need one. In a foreign country, pregnancy and the subsequent role of motherhood may have increased the feeling of anxiety and homesickness, but there is no denying that motherhood endows a sense a purpose like no other tasks can. D. Crummette propounds:

The transition in motherhood from feelings of inefficiency to those of adaptation and confidence are analyzed in relation to various factors, including the development of the child, the assumption of new roles, the values the mother holds for herself and the child, and matters of personal deprivation associated with mothering roles. (qtd. in Nityanandam 104)

This new sense of purpose is again articulated in *The Namesake*. With a growing baby relying solely on her, Ashima’s days become fuller with little time for boredom or listlessness. In her son, Ashima finds companionship which she sorely misses since her arrival in America. The novel states:

Before Gogol’s birth, her days followed no visible pattern. She would spend hours in the apartment, napping, sulking, re-reading the same five Bengali novels on the

bed...Now she wakes up at six... Every afternoon she takes him out, wandering up and down the streets... she discovers a yarn store and begins to knit for the coming winter.... (35)

For Ashima, motherhood also denotes a social and cultural expansion. With no experienced hand to guide her, she has to rely on her inventiveness to navigate the tricky waters of raising a child. As her son grows, Ashima too grows in maturity and insightfulness. A passage from the novel reads:

As the baby grows, so, too, does their circle of Bengali acquaintances...They all come from Calcutta, and for this reason alone they are friends...The wives, homesick and bewildered, turn to Ashima for recipes and advice, and she tells them about the carp that's sold in Chinatown, that it's possible to make *halwa* from Cream of Wheat. (ibidem 38)

The above statement testifies to the fact that Ashima's maternity extends beyond the child she has borne to encompass a larger communal space. In this manner, she becomes a catalyst for creating a community in a foreign country.

At the end of "The Third and Final Continent," the narrator states that his wife no longer weeps for her parents in Calcutta. Instead, she now weeps for their son who is away at college, indicating yet again the radical shift in the mindset of women in the diaspora post-motherhood.

For Jhumpa Lahiri's women, raising children in a foreign country proves to be a Herculean task for the simple reason that the traditions and values that they align themselves with are in opposition with the surrounding cultural environment that their children grow up in.

The resulting tension that arises from this dilemma becomes one of the most significant issues in the study of diaspora.

For the women in Lahiri's stories, distance does very little to lessen the intense connection that they maintain with the country of their birth. The ideals and values they learned in that country remains as relevant to them as the day they arrived in America. Thus, passing on their cultural legacy to their children becomes a way for them to maintain a link with their homeland. In her study of South Asian women in America, the Indian sociologist Aparna Rayaprol notes, "The women in my study consciously seek to do things as they were done by their mothers and hope that their children will do the same when they grow up. As such, they seek to establish a kind of ritual continuity with the past" (70).

Moreover, children in India are generally credited with very little independence and are viewed as extensions of their parents. Like their counterparts in India, parents in Lahiri's stories are determined to raise perfect Bengali children-educated, respectful, obedient and cultured. Since the role of a primary caretaker is highly gendered, the task of imparting traditions and values falls on the mothers rather than fathers. In relation to this, Rayaprol again states, "The anxiety over the possible assimilation of their children leads parents, especially mothers, to make conscious efforts to socialize their children into becoming 'good Indians' or 'good Hindus'" (68). Owing to this, nowhere in Lahiri's fiction do inherited beliefs finds more overt expression than in the process of raising children in a foreign country. Moreover, although the role religion is not explicit in these stories, the parents' anxiety over their children's assimilation can be attributed to the association of culture with the Hindu concept of liberation of soul. In this

manner, for Hindu parents, the transmission of culture encompasses the continuity of the soul which may not be fully comprehended by their American born children.

In the title story of *Unaccustomed Earth*, Ruma's mother does her best to replicate the traditional upbringing she had with her own children. When Ruma announces her intention to marry an American man, her mother considers it a personal slight. Although she has come to accept her son-in-law, her influence extends to Ruma's own role as a wife and mother. She expects Ruma to serve her husband in the same way she does for Ruma's father. She expresses astonishment at the kind of meals her daughter cooks for her family and often chides her for it. She has also taken to teaching Akash, Ruma's son some of the nuances of Bengali culture and is intent on conversing with her grandson in Bengali.

Although Ruma and her mother seem like complete opposites, the full implication of her mother's influence is realized after her death. Ruma finds herself encumbered with the feeling of guilt and inadequacy at the very American upbringing of her son. She also feels obligated to take in his widowed father despite his protests. Ruma's newfound empathy with her mother after her death is a testament to not only the far reaching influence of her mother, but also to the strength of her convictions. Ruma herself recognizes the parallels between their lives: "Growing up, her mother's example-moving to a foreign place for the sake of marriage, caring exclusively for children and a household-had served as a warning, a path to avoid. Yet this was Ruma's life now" (110).

The deep rootedness of cultural identity is again articulated in the second part *Unaccustomed Earth*. The protagonists Hema and Kaushik are products of the confusing clash between cultures typical of the diasporic experience. Their mothers met by chance when the

protagonists are still children, and they weave in and out of each other's lives throughout the three interlinked stories. Although the finer details of their upbringing are not documented, the traditions and values they inherit from their parents still take root in their lives. As they reach adulthood, Kaushik makes a conscious decision to dissociate himself from the restrictions of his parents' homeland and chooses to travel the world, essentially becoming rootless. Hema too deviates from the values of chastity and purity that her mother propounds by carrying on a long affair with a married man. Yet, when they meet after years of separation, they find themselves irresistibly drawn towards each other. When an acquaintance asks how they know each other, Kaushik's simple reply is "our parents" (311). Like most children in the diaspora, they are tied to a country they have little experience of due to the upbringing their parents give them.

In *The Namesake*, Ashima and Ashoke strives to incorporate their inherited values in the process of raising children in America. However, Gogol rebels and resists the stifling influence of his parents. He dates American women and craves independence, away from the reach of his traditional parents. His rejection of the Bengali pet name that is charged with significance for his father then becomes symbolic of the rejection of his cultural roots. When Ashoke suddenly dies of a heart failure, Ashima feels that it is her duty to find him a suitable wife. The marriage ends in a divorce due to Moushumi's infidelity. By then, Gogol has made peace with the duality of his identity and has learned to see the merits of the values that his parents strove so hard to pass on to them.

The exercise of analyzing the impact of tradition in the lives of Indian immigrants in Jhumpa Lahiri's stories extends beyond the study of ideals that are borne out the intermingling of religious and societal norms of the country of origin. It expands to include the idiosyncrasies,

customs, practices, and way of life that pertains to that country. In fact, an important facet of diasporic literature, especially the ones written by first generation immigrants, is the utilization of literature to document the characteristic traits of the native country. Though Lahiri is a second generation Indian-American, her interactions with members of the Bengali diaspora in America, combined with her numerous visits to Calcutta, provide her with enough experience to capture the finer nuances of Bengali identity in her works.

Jhumpa Lahiri's stories abound with these idiosyncrasies, and they are even more vividly articulated in the lives of immigrant women in America. In Asian culture, food is one of the most important signifier of cultural identity and the same is featured heavily in Lahiri's works. The consumption of fish and rice, the main staples of Bengali cuisine, is loaded with significance and it serves the purpose of not only filling empty stomachs, but also signifies nostalgia, homesickness and an unbreakable link with the homeland. In "The Third and Final Continent," the morning after his wife arrives in America, the narrator finds a plate of leftover rice and curry on the table, reminiscent of Bengali homes in India. The story comes full circle when in the end, the narrator says of his son, "So we drive to Cambridge to visit him, or bring him home for the weekend, so that he can eat rice with us with his hands, and speak in Bengali, things we sometimes worry he will no longer do after we die" (197). The quote perfectly sums up the ways in which food is tied up with the idea of home, and it is a trope that Lahiri frequently utilizes in her works.

Similarly, Mrs. Sen treats the process of buying and preparing fish with reverent ceremony in order to lend an air of normalcy in a strange country. An American boy whom she babysits narrates the pomp with which she prepares dinner for herself and husband. She has



brought a blade from Calcutta and Eliot describes, “she took whole vegetables between her hands and hacked them apart: cauliflower, cabbage, butternut squash. She split things in half, then quarters, speedily producing florets, cubes, slices and shreds” (114). In “Year’s End,” Kaushik is served an elaborate Bengali meal by his father’s new wife. Accustomed to eating American food, Kaushik is immediately taken back to his memories of Calcutta and Bombay.

While encumbered with her first pregnancy, Ashima craves for the typical Bengali street food made with puffed rice. Since the ingredients are not available in America, she improvises and mixes Rice Krispies, peanuts and onions in a bowl to make the snack. Replicating the flavours of their homeland is so important that the immigrants actively seek out ways to achieve it. In “The Third and Final Continent,” the narrator reports that he and his wife “discovered that a man named Bill sold fresh fish on Prospect Street, and that a shop in Harvard Square called Cardullo’s sold bay leaves and cloves” (196). Mrs. Sen too takes to buying halibut fishes from a market to prepare typical Bengali dishes she learned to cook at home.

For these immigrant women, the process of preparing and eating the food of their homeland bespeak the long process of homing in a foreign country. Moreover, feeding her husband and family is also considered one of the paramount duties of a wife. In *Unaccustomed Earth*, the omniscient narrator says of Ruma’s mother, “Her mother had never cut corners; even in Pennsylvania she had run her household as if to satisfy a mother-in-law’s fastidious eye” (22). Kaushik too notices the ceremonial way in which Chitra arranges the bowls. Preparing food is again an agency where cultural ideals are manifested, and these women are determined not to fall short of the standard that tradition demands of them.

In “Hell-Heaven” from *Unaccustomed Earth*, the narrator and her mother are approached by a Bengali man on the street. When he asks if she might be Bengali, the narrator states:

The answer to this question was clear, given that my mother was wearing red and gold bangles, unique to married Bengali women and a common Tangail *sari*, and had a thick stem of vermilion powder in the center parting of her hair, and the full round face that are so typical of Bengali women. (61)

This passage is indicative of the cultural significance of clothing, especially pertaining to Indian culture. Eliot notes that Mrs. Sen wears a different kind of *saris* every day, and Ruma’s mother leaves behind a collection of 218 *saris* when she dies. In fact, all the first generation women in Lahiri’s stories insist on draping themselves in the traditional attire, wear vermilion and adorn themselves with other indicators of their cultural identity. Traditional clothing like *sari* is connected with the notion of modesty and simplicity and thus, clothing themselves in such attire affirms their adherence to the ideals of womanhood found in their homeland.

The immigrants’ choice of attire is not just limited to women’s clothing. Lahiri’s stories contain several references to clothing preferences associated with Bengalis or even Indians universally. In “The Third and Final Continent,” the narrator’s new wife brings him two pullover sweaters she has knitted and two pairs of drawstring pajamas. On their many trips to Calcutta, Ashoke often returns with a supply of these pajamas. In *The Namesake*, the Indian footwear brand *Bata* is mentioned by Ashima, and later, on their trip to Calcutta, servants are instructed to buy slippers from *Bata* for them to wear at home. Undoubtedly, clothing items of all kinds can be easily procured in America. However, the emotional association of these items with the

memory of their lives in Calcutta creates an attachment that is irreplaceable with American items.

Apart from clothing items, Jhumpa Lahiri also captures the unique practices associated with Bengaliness or Indianness as a whole. For instance, Kaushik observes Chitra and her daughters applying coconut oil on each other's hair. Mrs. Sen sits on the floor while chopping vegetables, a common practice in Indian kitchens. Ruma's mother insists on holding the new baby, sometime for hours on end, instead of putting him down in the cot. In India, newborn babies are hardly left alone and this practice is carried over to her daughter's home. Although there are no cultural validations for these practices, they nonetheless provide a sense of familiarity for these immigrants.

Language is another important signifier of cultural and national identity, and it is generously employed throughout Lahiri's stories to bridge the emotional distance between the immigrants and their homeland. Even more so than any other factors, language sustains their connection with the homeland, and therefore it is treated with utmost respect. In these stories, Bengali is exclusively spoken at home, as Ruma's narrator states, "Her mother had been strict, so much so that Ruma had never spoken to her in English" (12). In the process of acculturation, children of immigrant parents, like Ruma, Gogol and Kaushik, starts losing their command on their mother tongue, and this become yet another gap that separates them from their parents.

The secondary position where tradition and their own biology relegate Indian women to is also the position that women from other cultures find themselves in. In *The Feminine Mystique* (1962), Betty Friedan states that the feminine mystique is the false notion that women are naturally fulfilled by devoting their lives to being housewives and mothers. In the book, Friedan

interviewed American suburban housewives in the 1950's and 60's and notes the general feeling of dissatisfaction among these women who appear to have perfect lives. Calling it "The Problem with No Name" (57), she describes the dilemma of American housewives as thus:

As she made the beds, shopped for groceries, matched slipover material, ate peanut butter sandwiches with her children, chauffeured Cub Scouts and Brownies, lay beside her husband at night-she was afraid to ask even of herself the silent question-"Is this all? (ibidem)

Unlike India where the ideals of womanhood originates from religious myths, Friedan notes that the model of a perfect women in American culture is put forth by women's magazines, who purports the idea that a woman's role and purpose in society is limited to her identity as a wife, mother and housewife. One of the interviewees in the book articulates her dissatisfaction:

I ask myself why I'm so dissatisfied. I've got my health, fine children, a lovely new home, enough money. My husband has a real future as an electronic engineer...It's as if ever since you were little, there's always been somebody or something that will take care of your life: your parents, or college, or falling in love, or having a child, or moving to a new house. Then you wake up one morning and there's nothing to look forward to. (ibidem 65)

The American housewife's unhappiness with her lot in life even though she conforms to the ideals of a perfect woman sets her apart from her counterparts in India. Since the models for womanly conduct are derived from religious myth in India, a Hindu woman generally fulfills the role assigned by traditions with pride and reverence, never considering it her place to question these age old convictions.

The diasporic women in Lahiri's fiction too affirm to this sense of resignation and carry out their womanly duties in accordance with the ideals that society puts forth for them. When they migrate to a more open society that would empower them, acculturating themselves to the enabling capacities of such society would seem like the obvious choice. However, these women's existence is centered in a very narrow space which severely limits their capability to transcend the roles assigned to them at birth.

The resistance to assimilation on the part of immigrant women deeply complicates the process of identity negotiation in a new country. The cultural theorist Homi Bhabha identifies a liminal space within the diaspora where cultural identities intermingle resulting in a hybrid form of identity. However, a study of diasporic women in Jhumpa Lahiri's works reveals a side of migration that leaves no room for hybridity. Identifying as they do with the traditions and values of their homeland, the cultural identity of these women is firmly rooted in their native country and their physical reality does very little to diminish their identification with the inherited cultural identity.

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### **CHAPTER III:**

#### **The Problem of Identity for Migrant Bengali Women**

The study of diasporas around the world has unanimously diagnosed the search for identity as one of the principal tensions that plague these immigrant communities. More often than not, the exercise of transnational migration is centered on negative experiences, especially if the culture of the homeland differs from that of the host country. Separated from everything they are familiar with and unable to adapt to the values and traditions of the new country, immigrants find themselves isolated and feel a sense of alienation from their new socio-cultural environment.

In the face of this painful predicament, memory acts as a link between the past and the present, and it also provides a connection between the immigrants and their native country, as Nityananda Pattanayak states, “they lead one to cultural travel, to reminisce the culture of origin, the displaced space and time. They help soothe the pains of loneliness, thereby giving succour to survive in an alien land” (19). However, maintaining a connection with the homeland interferes with the process of integration, and this makes the experience that much more painful for the immigrants.

Although maintaining a connection with the homeland is prioritized, the immigrants’ physical location evokes a desire to feel a sense of belongingness in the new country. Due to this dichotomy, immigrants oscillate between their past and present, leading to a search for identity that would ideally marry the values of both the homeland and adopted country. In reality, since the identity in question is rooted neither here nor there, the quest for identity only serves to complicate the experience of immigrants in their adopted countries.



In an interview, Jhumpa Lahiri, who herself is a second generation Indian-American, states, “The question of identity is always a difficult one, but especially so for those who are culturally displaced, as immigrants are, or those who grow up in two worlds simultaneously, as is the case for their children” (Houghton Mifflin). Thus, the desire to assert one’s identity in the face of conflicting cultural values is one of the defining characteristics of the diasporic experience that runs across all sections of the community. However, nowhere is the dilemma more profoundly manifested than in the lives of second-generation immigrants. These children of cultural transplants embody rootlessness, because the values and traditions they inherit from their parents are often in opposition with the values they inculcate from their country of birth. Invariably connected to a place they have no lived experience of, the second generation immigrants exemplify the state of in-betweenness, as they essentially straddle not just two identities, but also differing cultures.

Jhumpa Lahiri elucidates the diasporic experience thus:

I think that for immigrants, the challenges of exile, the loneliness, the constant sense of alienation, the knowledge of and longing for a lost world, are more explicit and distressing than for their children. On the other hand, the problem for the children of immigrants - those with strong ties to their country of origin - is that they feel neither one thing nor the other. (Houghton Mifflin)

In her stories, Lahiri’s own experience lends authenticity to the tensions that are a lived reality for herself and fellow immigrants in America. As a result, the question of identity, both national and cultural, features heavily in her works. As the case is with the broader diaspora, in Lahiri’s

works too, the search for identity finds more emphasis with the children of Bengali immigrants in America.

The concept of identity negotiation in a diasporic setting finds its footing in postcolonial discourse as the process of transnational migration has increased exponentially after the emergence of nation states in formerly colonized territories. Since dislocation from one's country, whether voluntary or forced, carries an implication of forced detachment from one's cultural roots, diaspora then becomes a breeding ground for new interpretations of ethnic, racial and cultural identity. The focus of the postcolonial interpretation of diaspora is then centered on plurality and diversity. In this sense, identity negotiation shifts from the hitherto Eurocentric colonial tendency to focus on indigenous interpretations of a plural identity. Thus, a study of identity reconstruction in postcolonial diasporic discourse is essentially, as David Chariandy puts it, "how historically disenfranchised peoples have developed inventive tactics for transforming even the most sinister experiences of dislocation into vibrant and revolutionary forms of political and cultural life" (1).

Postcolonial theory also serves the purpose of contextualizing the critical study of diaspora, as Yasmin Hussain states, "It allows for the detachment of forms from existing practices and their reformation or indeed 'transmigration' into new forms, new diverse logics and the creation of new forms of boundary" (13).

In her portrayal of first generation women immigrants who steadfastly adhere to ethnic identity, Lahiri fits the mould of a postcolonial writer. In the process of the colonizers' subjugation of native territories, one of the most important features was the

inferiorization/demonization of indigenous cultures. The colonizers exhibited a tendency to distort traditional values and customs in order to justify their subjugation of these peoples and cultures. Thus, the immediate concern of postcolonial discourse is the assertion of indigenous culture and to highlight its significance and merits in lieu of Western culture and values. By writing about women who assert their ethnic identity amidst the towering presence of another culture, Lahiri continues the postcolonial tradition of utilizing literature as a means of countering a dominant culture's tendency to impose its values on marginalized communities.

In his seminal work *The Location of Culture* (1994), Homi Bhabha, the most notable proponent of postcolonial theory, identifies an interstitial space in the postcolonial environment where multiple cultural practices, forms and beliefs intermingle. The space extends beyond liminality to open up a third space where these fused elements produce a new form of cultural expression, a hybridity. Due to its embodiment of plurality, diaspora then becomes a critical site where cultural hybridization takes place, a site Bhabha refers to as "realm of the beyond" (1). Following Bhabha's position and similar other postcolonial paradigms, the process of identity formation in a diasporic setting entails a fluid and negotiable identity that hints at a mutual recognition of differences, both from the immigrants and the host country.

A study of Jhumpa Lahiri's fiction demonstrates that the syncretization of two differing cultures is not always an easy exercise. In the face of such adversity, the sense of rootlessness experienced by the immigrants spur them into a frantic search for identity. Especially for the second generation immigrants, this search encompass elements of hybridity because the influence of their American upbringing intermingles with the traditions and values they inherit

from their parents. Moreover, for some individuals in the diaspora, hybrid identity is not just a pure ideal to pursue but a necessity under certain conditions. The dominant culture would not permit marginal culture to thrive, and since the culture in question is entrusted to subsequent generations who have not immersed themselves in the native culture, hybridization would be a natural progression instead of a conscious choice.

In *The Namesake*, Ashoke and Ashima are compelled to register their son's pet name because a letter from Ashima's grandmother containing his good name never arrives from Calcutta. Ashoke chooses the name Gogol after the Russian author Nikolai Gogol, to remind himself of all the good things in his life after a terrible accident during his youth in India. After reading a story by his namesake in a high school class, Gogol becomes aware of the peculiarity of his name. He manages to convince his reluctant parents to officially change his name to Nikhil Ganguli after his high school graduation. For him, moving away from the influence of his traditional parents to attend college at Yale proves to be a life-altering transformation, as the novel states, "But it is his room at Yale where he feels most comfortable" (108). He consciously distances himself from his parents' heritage, and exhibits his rebellion by smoking, drinking and dating American girls, all activities his parents shun.

After college, he starts going by the name Nick, a very Americanized version of his good name. In spite of Gogol's detachment from his cultural roots, his father's sudden death and his mother's decision to move back to India in the aftermath evoke a bittersweet feeling in him, as the novel states:

Without people in the world to call him Gogol, no matter how long he himself lives, Gogol Ganguli will, once and for all vanish from the lips of loved ones, and so, cease to exist. Yet the thought of this eventual demise provides no sense of victory, no solace. It provides no solace at all. (289)

Gogol ends up marrying Moushumi, an acquaintance from his youth, at his mother's behest. In marrying her, he fulfills "a collective deep-seated desire because they're both Bengali" (ibidem 224). While Moushumi has no qualms about continuing her affair with another man, Gogol has resolved to settle down and fit himself into a mould his father has set before him. Tejinder Kaur comments, "his desire to settle a home, have a family and a son and raise professionally in other countries hint at his quest for the new 'route' which will dawn on him..." (42). This route is realized after his divorce and the discovery of his father's past, and Gogol has come to accept the values of the traditions and customs that he has consciously detached himself from all his life.

Moushumi rejection of Gogol demonstrates her feeling of being trapped by the expectations cast on her on account of her cultural heritage, as the novel informs, "From earliest girlhood, she says, she had been determined not to allow her parents to have a hand in her marriage" (ibidem 213), and that she hates cultural trappings in which "she feels no sense of authority" (ibidem 202). While Gogol's search for an identity that would serve his cultural plurality leads him towards a path of newfound cultural awareness, Moushumi ends up rejecting the consequences of her heritage. The audacity of Moushumi's rejection also hints at the expectations laden on women which are more pronounced than for their male counterparts. For

individuals like Moushumi who are determined to assert their individuality, their needs cannot be satisfied within the constraints of traditional gender roles. Thus, the forcible severance of cultural ties seems to be the only option for them to experience the independence and freedom that they crave.

In the second part of *Unaccustomed Earth*, Kaushik's formative years is spent shuffling between countries, never living in one place long enough to lay down roots. Born in America to Bengali parents, his family relocates to Bombay when he was eight years old. A few years later, a teenage Kaushik returns to America with his family again. His plight is further aggravated by his mother's death and his father's subsequent remarriage to a widowed mother from Calcutta. Unable to find common ground with his stepmother and sisters, he completely detaches himself from any kind of rootedness. He instead travels the world photographing wars, famines and destructions, both homeless and at home everywhere. As an adult, Kaushik embodies rootlessness and an arbitrary identity, and his journey is not so much about quest for identity as it is about self-realization. His story reveals yet another dimension of the diasporic experience where straddling of two worlds evoke a desire to break free of roots to live as a true citizen of the world.

Although the issue of identity reconstruction is most clearly represented by second generation immigrants, the first generation men in Jhumpa Lahiri's stories have not completely escaped the process of reconstruction in a foreign land. Interactions with their American peers as well as economic compulsions push them out of the demarcations of ethnic identity, resulting in a broadening of their perspectives, especially pertaining to their host country. As a result, rigid

cultural values expand to make some leeway for reconstitution. In this manner, even though they have one foot firmly planted in the values of their homeland, the other constantly hovers over new ground. In Lahiri's immigrant men, this often translates to adaptability and the willingness to consider acculturation to deal with the demands of their transcultural existence.

In the title story of *Unaccustomed Earth*, Ruma's father finds himself alone after the sudden death of his wife, decades after they first arrive in America. Custom in India dictates that men are largely dependent on women when it comes domestic duties, first on their mothers and then wives. When Ruma's father is compelled to live alone, he experiences the thrill of independence since he has spent his whole life being tied down by his roots and the demands of raising a family in a foreign land. Instead of wallowing in misery and loneliness, he spends his time travelling alone. On his travels, he meets another Bengali named Mrs. Bagchi, and they quickly start a relationship, spending his nights with her. He comments, "How freeing it was, these days, to travel alone, with only a single suitcase to check" (7). When his daughter asks him to move in with her, he declines saying, "He did not want to be a part of another family, part of the mess, the feuds, the demands, the energy of it" (ibidem 53). Ruma notices this shift in her father's identity when she comments, "She was struck by the degree to which her father resembled an American in his old age" (ibidem 11). Although Ruma's father lives the life of a dutiful Indian husband while his wife is alive, the influences of American values and culture that he has accumulated over the years are expressed only after he finds himself alone.

In "The Third and Final Continent" from *Interpreter of Maladies*, the narrator exhibits immense adaptability when he endures crippling poverty and isolation in his journey across three

continents. When he arrives in America after his stint as an impoverished student in London, he initially stays at a YMCA hostel. With no money to spare, he foregoes familiar comfort food and sustains himself eating American cereals. Then he finds boarding with a 103 year old American woman named Mrs. Croft. At first glance, they appear to be incompatible due to their differing backgrounds; he nonetheless forms a deep bond with her. Years later, when he hears of her death, he reveals that hers is the first death that he mourns in America. The story is significant as it reveals the triumph of the human spirit in the midst of seemingly insurmountable challenges. In a diasporic setting, this is generally not possible without the involvement of identity negotiation and subsequent reconstruction.

Although the processes of identity negotiation and reconstruction take root in some characters in Jhumpa Lahiri's fiction, a wider study of women characters, especially first generation immigrants, reveals a dichotomy that does not conform to the established understanding of identity formation in a diasporic setting. Growing up in a tradition bound society, the first generation women in Lahiri's fiction carry over their inherited beliefs and ideals when they relocate to another country. As established gender roles in India dictates, their lives mostly revolve around domestic duties, and hence their interaction with the outside world is very limited. The resulting alienation, homesickness and isolation result in the assertion of their ethnic identity, and thus these women "essentialise contra-acculturation for their emotional and psychological needs" (Nayak 132).

When the first generation immigrants in Lahiri's narratives root their identity in the values of the homeland, it disrupts the process of integration in a new country, thus impeding on



their potential to transcend narrow gendered spaces prescribed by the more conservative traditions of the homeland. On the other hand, rooting one's identity in a fixed set of beliefs and ideals nullifies the need for identity reconstitution, as the identity in question is already whole and established. In this manner, for the first generation women in Jhumpa Lahiri's fiction, a peculiar dichotomy exists between the enabling capability of tradition to liberate the women from identity crisis, and its power to confine them to narrow gendered spaces in a diasporic setting.

In *The Namesake*, Ashima is burdened with an intense feeling of homesickness while experiencing her first pregnancy in a foreign country. Since her husband is away at work during the day, she spends her time crying and lamenting about her loneliness. Their friendly American neighbours Alan and Judy offer them help, and when Gogol is born, they come over to celebrate, bringing their children's old things. For Ashima, forming a bond with Judy who is a mother herself could have eased her burden and makes the transition to motherhood that much easier. Instead, she isolates herself at home and bears the burden on her own. The bond she forms in America is with other Bengalis, immigrants like herself, who live far away and offer her little in terms of companionship.

Ashima's experience of motherhood in a foreign country demonstrates that the immigrant women's comprehension of identity formation is based on the self/other confrontation that disregards the process of negotiation that moves beyond the cataloguing of differences. Setting the immigrant self against the American other obliterates the very space that Homi Bhabha identifies as the breeding ground for hybrid identity. Since the process of identity negotiation in a

foreign country generally entails the fusion of different cultural beliefs and values, a strict adherence to a single set of traditions derived from one country negates the notion that identity is “constructed, fluid and multiple” (Brubaker 1).

The comprehension of culture and identity formation is mostly based on the process of exclusivity and othering of other cultures. It also depends heavily upon “both an appropriation, and more often and more visibly, rejection, inferiorization/forced ignorance of another culture” (Chakrabarty 34). A study of Jhumpa Lahiri’s women characters seems to reveal a deviated perception of this process of identity formation. Appropriation and othering of other cultures are concepts that are most commonly used in the context of a larger, more dominant culture, presumably of Western countries. These same concepts are at the very heart of the postcolonial understanding of identity formation, as the colonizers’ othering and inferiorization of native cultures served as catalysts for the firm assertion of indigenous cultural identity in a postcolonial world.

The status of women in India is mostly viewed by the West as stifling, restricting and detrimental to women’s rights and freedom. Consequently, when a woman moves to a more liberal society that would empower her, latching onto the enabling capacities of such society would seem like the obvious choice. However, in Jhumpa Lahiri’s stories, the process of othering and exclusivity shifts to the immigrants, and the host country is often viewed in opposition to the native culture. Since the parameters used in the process are derived from the traditions and values of the homeland, the host country is then found lacking. This excludes the

characteristics of the host country in the process of identity formation, while reinforcing the immigrant's incentive to base their identity solely on the culture and practices of the homeland.

Moreover, it is important to note that in Lahiri's stories, American society is not necessarily portrayed in a bad light and the dynamics of racism does not come into play in these stories. Hence, the identity question to be negotiated by the first generation immigrant Bengali women in Lahiri's fiction is intricately connected with their skewed perception of the adopted country, as well as with the life and custom of their native land.

In *Interpreter of Maladies*, Mrs. Sen takes great pride in regaling her American ward with tales from her homeland. She compares it with her new home and constantly points out the shortcomings of American society. At one point, she asks Eliot if anyone would come if she screams. She tells him, "At home, that is all you have to do. Not everybody has a telephone. But you raise your voice a bit, or express grief or joy of any kind, and one whole neighborhood and half of another has come to share the news, to help with arrangements" (116). When the boy tells her that people in America might call but only to complain about the noise, the implication is clear. For Mrs. Sen, America sorely lacks the sense of community that is found in the close-knit Indian society; and this only increases her affinity with the country she left behind.

In the same story, Mrs. Sen has taken to buying fresh fishes from the market to replicate the Bengali dishes she eats at home. She would call her husband at the university to tell him to pick up the fishes. Mr. Sen insists on teaching her how to drive a car so that she would be able to go places on her own without his help. In this context, driving represents mobility and freedom from her dependence on Mr. Sen. However, she tells Eliot's mother, "At home, you know, we have a

driver”(ibidem 113). She herself admits that she is a slow learner, a fact validated by Eliot. Her reluctance in learning how to drive seems to emanate from the belief that such tasks are beneath her standing as a professor’s wife. This aspect of the story demonstrates that the enabling qualities of the new country in the form of individual independence are often resisted in favour of adhering to the ways and customary practices of the homeland. In the title story from *Unaccustomed Earth*, Ruma’s mother reacts to the news that she is marrying an American with the statement, “You are ashamed of yourself, of being Indian” (26). She considers Ruma’s decision as a betrayal of the roots that she takes so much pride in.

For the first generation women in Lahiri’s stories, the notion of identity formation also takes generously from their often limited perception of American culture. More often than not, since different cultures have different moral and sexual codes, the more liberal atmosphere in America is seen with derision and is often equated with looser morals. This perception colours their viewpoint and seeps through their interactions with the host country. In *The Namesake*, Gogol is warned from dating American girls by his parents. According to them, marrying an American girl could only end in divorce. While it may be true that divorce rate in America is higher than in India, this attitude is still tinged with bias and generalization. This same attitude is displayed by the narrator’s Bengali mother in “Hell-Heaven” from *Unaccustomed Earth*. In the story, the narrator’s mother reacts unfavorably to the news that a Bengali man whom she secretly loves is marrying an American woman. She confidently tells her friends, “She will leave him...he is throwing his life away” (73).

For the first generation women in Jhumpa Lahiri's stories, the process of othering is not limited to their American peers, but also extends to their fellow immigrants who are perceived to have moved away from Indian traditions to embrace the American way of life. This particular aspect of the self/other manifestation is revealed in the second part of *Unaccustomed Earth*. In the story, the narrators' mothers met by chance in America not long after they arrived from India. Their shared experience of isolation in an unfamiliar country results in a deep friendship, a bond that is akin to a sisterly relationship. Kaushik's family leaves America to settle back in Bombay, bringing the burgeoning friendship to an abrupt end. When Hema's parents learn of the family's imminent return, they offer them a place to stay in spite of the distance that time has wedged between the two families. However, Hema's family soon learns that things are not the same as before, as Hema's mother states, "Bombay had made them more American than Cambridge had" (235).

Upon their return to America, Kaushik's parents have shunned all the traits that connect the two families in the first place. Kaushik's mother had cut her hair short, wore slacks instead of *sari* and she had also taken up to drinking liquor after meals. According to Hema's mother, she has become "stylish" and Hema comments that it is "a pejorative term in her vocabulary, implying a self-indulgence that she shunned" (236). Hema's mother's reaction vividly demonstrates the immigrants' attitude towards American culture. More than that, it illustrates their acceptance that "Americanization" of Indian immigrants indicates a failure to resist the influence of Western culture, and that they pride themselves in being able to do so.

A study of the role that tradition plays in the process of identity formation in Jhumpa Lahiri's fiction can be interpreted as a manifestation of the confining power of inherited traditions and ideals in a more liberal society like America. While it is true that the first generation women in Lahiri's stories are confined to a life of domesticity due to established gender roles, the prioritization of the enabling and stabilizing qualities of Western culture in the exercise of multicultural interaction disregards the deep rootedness of Indian culture that these women base their identity on. The insistence that the more evolved culture of the West has the capacity to liberate women from various restrictions imposed by patriarchy relegates Indian women to a position of inferiority and helplessness. Hence, the perception of the position of women in India by the West is vulnerable to ethnocentric distortions, as Yasmin Hussain states, "They were perceived from the perspective of essentially Western values so that the emphasis on independence and individuality and the comparability of sexes evoked stereotypical images" (22).

The essentialisation of Western culture also distorts the understanding of feminism, the very theory that gives voice to women in their fight against gender oppression. In regard to this, Nana Wilson-Tagoe states, "For feminism is really a particular Western inflected political discourse committed to changing patterns of patriarchal domination and sexism in all areas of life and relationships" (121). She also states, "In its very beginning, feminism sought to create a homogenous women's standpoint that had its basis in commonly held epistemologies about women" (ibidem). Thus, the conventional understanding of feminism seeks to establish solidarity among women based on common experiences of oppression. This perception proves to be problematic as it disregards racial, ethnic and class concerns.

Since the traditional conception of Indian womanhood is heavily centered on genders roles that are perceived as restrictive to women's expression of individuality and independence, Western culture has a tendency to posit Indian culture as the negation of freedom. It excludes the centrality of cultural values in the Indian woman's conception of the self and her construction of self-identity. Thus, the dismissal of traditions in this manner problematizes the process of identity formation for Indian women. Moreover, it also reflects on the often coercive and essentialist attitudes of the West towards other cultures.

Women in India are raised to imbibe the ideals and values that established gender roles demands of them. Thus, they play a very little role in the naming of their identity as it is already defined by the roles that tradition prescribes for them. As a result, women become the embodiment of culture and the traditions that define that culture. In this manner, an Indian woman's perception of her identity is centered on her position as a carrier of cultural values and they become, as Kalra, et al put it, "creators of ties that bind and carriers of culture" (52). The paradox seen in identity of Indian women is this- while tradition removes their power in the naming of their own identity, it also empowers them to disseminate cultural values and beliefs. In other words, they become the agency that epitomizes their culture.

In a diasporic setting, conforming to the traditions of the homeland alienates women from their new cultural environment, thus rendering their experience in a foreign country that much more difficult. However, the pain of isolation and homesickness provides them with an incentive to create agencies that would mitigate their often painful existence in a new country. Since cultural isolation highlights the values of their inherited traditions, they become the agents that

represent cultural values in a foreign country. In regard to this, Gayatri Gopinath notes, “women’s bodies, then, become crucial to nationalistic discourse in that they serve not only as the site of biological reproduction but as the very embodiment of a nostalgically evoked communal past and tradition” (138).

For the diasporic women, language, food and cultural practices serve as mediators that bridge the emotional distance between the homeland and the host country. Their endorsement and practice of these mediums place them in a position wherein they cultivate networks where cultural values find expression. Through the bonds they form with other immigrants on the basis of shared experience of exile, they become the agents of a diasporic community that serves as a homogenous site to preserve cultural identity and to constitute a resistance against the pressure of assimilation. In regard to this, Shobhita Jain comments, “It has been reported that Indian diasporic women, much like women in India, play a key role both in construction and sustenance of nuclear as well as extended family networks” (2).

In Jhumpa Lahiri’s stories, the first generation women immigrants adopt various means to counter the pangs of homesickness and isolation. Since the adopted mediums are derived from the traditions and values of the homeland, they become not only the carriers of culture and preservers of identity, but also the intermediaries that checkmate the dissolution of cultural identity in a diasporic setting.

In an interview in 1985, Ngugi Wa Thiong, a renowned African writer proclaims, “Language is a carrier of people’s culture; culture is a carrier of people’s values; values are the basis of a people’s self-definition-the basis of their consciousness” (2). The statement perfectly



sums up the significance of native language in the preservation of ethnic identity in a pluralistic setting. In Lahiri's stories, Bengali is exclusively spoken at home, as Ruma's narrator in "Unaccustomed Earth" states, "Her mother had been strict, so much so that Ruma had never spoken to her in English" (12). First generation women in these stories like Ruma's mother, Ashima and Mrs. Sen insist on speaking Bengali with their respective families in spite of the convenience of adopting English as their primary language. Their sense of identity is firmly linked with the use of their native language and for these women, forsaking the language seems to indicate a denial of cultural roots, and thus they employ language as a medium through which cultural identity is expressed and asserted.

In "When Mr. Pirzada Came to Dine," a young Indian girl is confounded by the knowledge that her Bengali parents do not share a common nationality with Mr. Pirzada despite their use of a common language, i.e. Bengali. In 1947, just before the end of colonialism in India, the British government divided the province of Bengal between the Republic of India and the new State of Pakistan, with West Bengal becoming a province of India and East Bengal becoming a province of Pakistan. East Bengal, later renamed Bangladesh, emerged as an independent nation in 1971 after achieving independence from Pakistan in the Bangladesh Liberation War. Mr. Pirzada, who is from Dhaka, Bangladesh forms a lasting bond with the girl's parents on account of their shared cultural past, and she notices how compatible he is with her family in spite of the differing nationalities. The story illustrates that role that a common language plays in bringing people together. Hence, the immigrant women's crucial role in the employment of Bengali as a primary language within nuclear families and larger community networks serves to assert a sense of community and solidarity among Bengalis in America.

In her study of South Asian women in the diaspora, Aparna Rayaprol notes that preparing and sharing of ethnic food help forge community solidarity and food becomes a symbol of the immigrants' shared roots (68). In *The Namesake*, food is an important medium through which Ashima forges a bond with other Bengali women. The novel states, "The wives, homesick and bewildered, turn to Ashima for recipes and advice, and she tells them about the carps that's sold in Chinatown, that it's possible to make *halwa* from Cream of Wheat" (38). In "Hell-Heaven," the narrator's Bengali mother is befriended by another Bengali man in America. The narrator recounts the process through which a deep bond is formed between the two:

After learning that he had not had a proper Bengali food in more than three months, she served him the leftover curried mackerel and rice that we had eaten for dinner that night before. He remained into the evening for a second dinner after my father got home, and after that he showed up for dinner almost every night, occupying the fourth chair at our square Formica kitchen table and becoming a part of our family in practice as well as name. (62)

The capacity of ethnic food to dissolve boundaries and initiate bonds is again demonstrated in "Once in a Lifetime" from *Unaccustomed Earth*. In the story, the narrators' mothers grew up in differing social classes in Calcutta, and Hema comments, "In Calcutta, they probably would have had little occasion to meet" (225). However, in America, none of these divisions matter, as Hema again states, "Those differences were irrelevant in Cambridge, where they were both equally alone" (*ibidem*). The bond they share through their common alienation is further reiterated by all the times they spend preparing food together: "Here they shopped

together for groceries and complained about their husbands and cooked at either your stove or ours, dividing up the dishes for our respective families when they were done” (ibidem).

Laura Ahn Williams states, “In Asian American literature, food as metaphor frequently constructs and reflects relationships to racialized subjectivity and also addresses issues of authenticity, assimilation, and desire” (70). She also comments that in Lahiri’s stories, “food is the means for characters to assert agency and subjectivity in ways that function as an alternative to the dominant culture” (ibidem). The purpose that food serves as an agency that mitigates homesickness and asserts a connection with the homeland is clearly illustrated in “Mrs. Sen.” The story is seen through the eyes of an American boy, and he narrates the way in which Mrs. Sen spends her days preparing food for herself and her husband. In the process of systematically chopping vegetables and meat to prepare ethnic Bengali dishes, she recounts the practices and traditions of the home she left behind. In this manner, food acts as a link between her past and present, and it also provides her with a cultural lifeline in a country she still feels so disconnected from.

Replicating the cultural practices and custom of the homeland in terms of ceremonies and celebrations also act as a synthesizer of community bonds, and in Jhumpa Lahiri’s stories, women play a central role in the organization of these customary practices. Throughout all these stories, community get-togethers or parties serve as sites where bonds are formed and strengthened among members of that community. In *The Namesake*, the process by which a diasporic community is formed is expressed as thus:

Through the Nandis, now expecting a child of their own, Ashoke and Ashima meet the Mitras, and through the Mitras, the Banerjees. More than once, pushing Gogol in his stroller, Ashima has been approached on the streets of Cambridge by young Bengali bachelors, shyly enquiring after her origins. Like Ashoke, the bachelors fly back to Calcutta one by one, returning with wives. Every weekend, it seems, there is a new home to go to, a new couple or young family to meet. (38)

Several times in the novel, Ashima hosts these parties and spends days preparing food for the Bengali guests. One such occasion is Gogol's rice ceremony or *Annaprasan*, an important Bengali custom. When Ashima makes the decision to move back to India, she hosts a final party at her home for all the friends that she has made in America. In a way, this signals a befitting closure for a woman who is instrumental in reinforcing a community bond in the country of her exile.

Hema, the narrator of "Once in a Lifetime," also recount the parties that her Bengali mother hosts when she was growing up. She particularly remembers the party that her mother hosts for Kaushik's family just before they leave for Bombay. She recalls, "What I remember most clearly are the hours before the party, which my mother spent preparing for everyone to arrive: the furniture was polished, the paper plates and napkins set out on the table..." (223). She also recalls that her mother insists on her wearing an uncomfortable *salwar kameez* to look presentable for the guests. Hema's mother's detailed preparation for the party is indicative of the values that are placed in these community get-togethers.

A study of the agencies that immigrant women create and assert in their endeavor of survival in a foreign country expounds the notion that fidelity to inherited traditions and beliefs exhibits multi-dimensional implications. Their resistance to the empowering features of their new country isolates and alienates them, riddling their transition with intense agony and misery. However, the very idea of empowerment in the context of immigrants can be brought into question. In the western use of the word, empowerment carries a connotation of independence and individual assertion. While it is undeniable that enabling qualities of American culture has the capacity to free them from the shackles of established gender role, it certainly carries adverse repercussions as well.

As is evidenced by the rootlessness and search for identity painfully manifested in second-generation immigrants, denying of one's cultural roots does not necessarily result in a complete detachment from them. Instead, what it often leads to is an identity that is rooted neither in the homeland nor the host country. The implications of this in-between identity can be just as painful as an attachment to a country that is no longer physically inhabited by the immigrants. Thus, the perception that Western culture and all that it represents is the answer to the assorted diasporic tensions is biased and faulty. Consequently, a detailed study of first generation women in Jhumpa Lahiri's stories reveals that rooting one's identity in the culture and traditions of the homeland enables them to escape the identity crisis that acculturated individuals in the diaspora often encounter.

More than just liberating women from identity crisis, rooting one's identity in the culture and traditions of the homeland also empowers them to utilize cultural homogeneity to develop

strategies to cope with their disconnection from the culture of the host country. In this manner, a sense of community and solidarity that is borne out of culture enabled agencies offers them a safe haven where they are shielded against the pressure of assimilation by the host culture.

In a study of Jhumpa Lahiri's women characters, an interesting point to note is the representation of conflicts that affects women that deviates from cultural norms. In her stories, the first generation women arrive in America when arranged marriages bound them to men that are practically strangers to them. In spite of this, the domestic lives of these women are more or less harmonious and marital tensions are not expressed in these characters. As is the norm in Indian marriages, outward expressions of love and affection are rare and not forthcoming. However, they are still portrayed as unified units in the process of building new lives in America. Hence, the conflicts that these women face mainly emanate from their attempt at keeping traditions alive in a new country, and these conflicts are mainly manifested in the way they raise their Americanized children, and in their interactions with the new cultural environment.

On the other hand, women who do not conform to traditional values and ideals are plagued with conflicts that transcend their diasporic identity. In "A Temporary Matter" from *Interpreter of Maladies*, a very westernized second generation Bengali couple confronts their marital troubles under the cover of darkness that an electrical outage affords. Unlike marriages in India which are generally considered to be binding and inescapable, their confrontation spells a premature ending for their marriage. In *The Namesake*, Gogol's wife Moushumi carries on an affair with another man in the course of their short marriage. When Gogol learns of her infidelity, the marriage comes to an abrupt end. These two stories illustrate a conflict that is

borne out of the emphasis on independence and individuality that Western culture endorses. For Indian women in traditional communities, divorce is not an option when they are faced with marital troubles, and it is a concept that is alien to the first generation immigrants as well.

In the title story of *Interpreter of Maladies*, a married Indian-American woman confesses the terrible burden that she has carried to her Indian tour guide. She reveals that one of her three children is not her husband's, and that the child was conceived when a friend came to stay at her house in America. Sang from "Nobody's Business" in *Unaccustomed Earth* is tortured by her love for a man who is committed to another woman. Similarly, Hema is conflicted by her long affair with a married man named Julian. Among the first generation women, the narrator's mother in "Hell-Heaven" develops romantic feelings for a bachelor she has welcomed in her home. She reveals, years later, that when the man announces his engagement to an American woman, she had made an attempt to take her own life.

These women exhibit a deviation from the ideals of a perfect woman which emphasizes on devotion, fidelity, chastity and modesty. Since the first generation women in Lahiri's stories internalize these very ideals through their upbringing in a traditional Indian society, the conflicts that plague their counterparts do not find purchase in their lives. *The Namesake* articulates these differences as thus:

But unfortunately they have not considered it their duty to stay married, as the Bengalis of Ashoke and Ashima's generation do. They are not willing to accept, to adjust, to settle for something less than their ideal of happiness. That pressure

has given way, in the case of the subsequent generations, to American common sense. (276)

In actuality, the broader range of conflicts that is manifested in women who do not conform to cultural ideals is directly related to the fact that diasporic tensions as such do not feature as heavily in the corresponding stories or characters. Subsequently, any implication that their deviation from traditional ideals is directly linked with these universal conflicts is completely unintended on the author's part. However, cataloging of difference in the conflicts between these women nonetheless illustrates the dichotomy in the representation of traditions in Lahiri's stories.

The understanding that the question of identity for first generation immigrant women in Jhumpa Lahiri's stories is deeply entrenched in the traditions and values of the homeland does not always point towards a stagnant identity that leaves no room for growth or adaptation. While first generation women like Ruma's mother manages to spend their whole lives without giving away any of their inherited beliefs, there are others who demonstrate immense adaptability to their changing environment. However, for these women who root their identity in the homeland, adaptation and accommodation is not borne out of assimilation, but put into motion by the needs of the time.

In *The Namesake*, Ashima shows a great capacity for adaptation when her husband is transferred out of town and she has to live on her own. Growing up in a traditional society, she has spent all her life being dependent on her parents, and later on her husband. When Ashoke receives a grant to direct a research in Ohio, Gogol and everyone else assume that she would



follow him there. She surprises them by announcing her intention to stay on in the house: “But then, his mother had surprised them, pointing out that there would be nothing for her to do in Ohio for nine months....and that she preferred to stay in Massachusetts even if it meant staying in the house alone” (144).

Living alone after years of sharing her space with other people proves to be quite a challenge for Ashima. She notes, “At forty-eight she has come to experience the solitude that her husband and son and daughter already know, and which they claim not to mind” (161). Her children dismisses her concerns saying that everyone should live on their own at some point. Having dedicated her whole life to her family, she is at loss for what to do with all the free time she now has in her hands. The novel states, “But Ashima feels too old to learn such a skill. She hates returning in the evenings to a dark, empty house, going to sleep on one side of the bed and waking up on another” (ibidem).

In spite of the initial hiccups she experiences, Ashima perseveres, and her decision to live alone proves to be the start of a revolution in her life. She starts working part-time in a library, and after years of living in America, she makes her first American friends there. Her interactions with these new friends provide her with a new insight into her adopted country, and she has become more flexible in her view towards American idiosyncrasies. After expressing disappointment at her son’s relationship with an American woman, the novel comments, “She knows the relationship is something she must be willing to accept. Sonia has told her this, so have her friends in the library” (166). When she complains to her friends that her children are growing distant from her, they tell her, “it was inevitable, that parents had to stop assuming that

their children would return faithfully for the holidays” (ibidem). Ashima admits, “This too, she is beginning to learn” (ibidem).

Ashoke then suddenly dies of a heart attack in Ohio and Ashima finds herself truly alone. With her children grown up and her husband no more, Ashima makes the decision to divide her time between her brother’s house in Calcutta and her children’s in America. By then, Ashima is no longer encumbered by the rigid values and ways that she has based her entire life on. She is able to accept her daughter’s relationship with an American man, and when Gogol and Moushumi are divorced, she accepts that too. The novel comments, “True to the meaning of her name, she will be without borders, without a home of her own, a resident everywhere and nowhere” (276).

Ashima’s homelessness at the end of *The Namesake* is different from the rootlessness that some characters like Kaushik experiences in their lives. For Kaushik, travelling around the world without putting down roots anywhere is a way for him to checkmate his rootlessness. His discomfort with being tied down by his parents’ cultural roots drives him to shrug off his inherited identity to live as a true citizen of the world. On the contrary, Ashima’s travelling is brought about by her sure knowledge of her roots. In her case, homelessness does not indicate an absence of cultural roots, but the absence of a permanent home to call her own. Her unwavering dedication to the upholding of her inherited identity in a foreign country is foreshadowed at the beginning of the novel. Just before leaving for America, Ashima goes to visit her now deceased grandmother. The novel comments:

Unlike her parents, and other relatives, her grandmother had not admonished Ashima not to eat beef or wear skirts or cut off her hair or forget her family the moment she landed in Boston. Her grandmother had not been fearful of such signs of betrayal; she was the first person to predict, rightly, that Ashima would never change. (37)

In their transcending of national borders, Ashima, and to an extent Kaushik, echoes certain strains of the Indian writer Amitav Ghosh who extensively explores the notion of borders in his works. In his famous novel *The Shadow Lines* (1988), Ghosh questions the validity of national borders and asserts that they are nothing but 'shadow lines.' In the novel, the narrator's grandmother grew up in East Bengal and settles in Calcutta after her marriage. When Bengal was divided, her 'home' becomes an unfamiliar foreign country. Thus, her comprehension of identity is inseparable from her understanding of borders as physical, tangible lines that severed her from her home and family. This idea is so strong in her mind that she asks her grandson if she would be able to see the border between India and Pakistan from the plane. She expects to see at least soldiers or trenches. When her family replies that no such things are visible, she incredulously replies:

But if there aren't any trenches or anything, how are people to know? I mean, where's the difference then? And if there's no difference both sides will be the same; it will be just like it used to be before, when we used to catch a train in Dhaka and get off in Calcutta the next day without anybody stopping us. What

was it all for then-partition and all the killing and everything-if there isn't something in between. (151)

Thus, the conception of borders in the novel is not as physical lines, but merely a mirage or shadows. By moving seamlessly through spaces without the restrictions of borders, Ashima and Kaushik echo the sentiments that Amitav Ghosh presents in his works.

In "The Third and Final Continent, the narrator comments in the end that his son has a mother who is happy and strong (197). At the beginning of story, the narrator remembers his new wife crying of homesickness in Calcutta when her parents are in the same city. This makes him question whether she would be able to survive in America, seeing as it is where she would eventually have to live. Mala's transformation, much like Ashima's, is inspired by her adaptability to a new country, and it does not mean that she has accultured herself to America.

In Jhumpa Lahiri's stories, Ashima, and to some extent, Mala exhibit slightly different tendencies from that of their first generation counterparts in other stories. Their characters demonstrate that longevity and interactions with American peers can inspire a change in outlook and perspectives. In Ashima's case, it brings about quite a radical change in the way she perceives American influences. However, in terms of identity formation in a foreign country, the identity they have come to embrace is readjusted to accommodate the needs of their changing circumstances. This is different from identity reconstruction, as that implies taking apart one's construct of his/her identity and rebuilding it to include new aspects that comes out from the hybridization between different cultural beliefs and values. For these women, in spite of the

adjustments, their identity is still grounded in the values and traditions of their homeland and trauma that accompanies rootlessness, and the quest for identity is gradually transcended.

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## **Chapter IV:**

### **Conclusion**

The critical endeavor of situating women in a larger diasporic setting is riddled with numerous complexities because the uniqueness of women's experience in that location is intricately linked with the question of identity that is often in opposition to the values of the host country. This is especially true of the first generation Bengali women in Jhumpa Lahiri's fiction who exhibit fidelity to the traditions and customs of India even when dwelling in the country of their exile. Thus, in the study of women's experience in Lahiri's diasporic narratives, contra-acculturation, which reflects the opposite tendency of acculturation, finds manifestation in these first generation women.

In these stories, inherited traditions and values play an important role in shaping the perspectives and experience of the first generation women characters. In this manner, the characters' contra-acculturation tendencies often deviate from the established understanding of identity formation in the diaspora, as Bhagabat Nayak states, "Jhumpa Lahiri reiterates her Indianness through an ethical commitment to the indigenous culture of her Indian characters and tries to relocate their cultural space and identity in their otherness" (132).

In postcolonial discourse, Homi Bhabha identifies a production site in multicultural societies where cultural interactions breed a new form of identity expression referred to as hybridity. In his interpretation of Bhabha's theory, Benjamin Graves states, "the negotiation of cultural identity involves the continual interface and exchange of cultural performances that in turn produce a mutual and mutable recognition (or representation) of cultural difference"



([www.postcolonialweb.org](http://www.postcolonialweb.org)). In this sense, hybridity can be interpreted as an ideal state that is borne out of a mutual agreement to recognize the multiplicity of cultural expressions. On the other hand, hybridity can also be interpreted as a subversive tool to counter the dominant culture's tendency to impose Western-centric values on the marginalized people.

In the study of Jhumpa Lahiri's fiction, adherence to inherited beliefs and traditions carried over from the homeland results in the resistance to the influence of the values of the new country. Thus, if hybridity is interpreted as a mutual recognition of cultural differences, the first generation women's insistence on asserting their otherness to American culture negates the connotation of reciprocity in the process of cultural interaction. Moreover, in Lahiri's stories, American society is not presented as a hegemonic power structure in the postcolonial sense, and the Indians in these stories are hardly subalterns that are subjugated to a dominant power. Instead, the conflicts that plague these characters, especially the first generation Indian women, emanate from their struggles in reconciling their allegiance to the homeland with their physical and lived reality. Thus, in these stories, traditions and beliefs inherited from their traditional upbringing problematize the women's assimilation into the new country.

When asked why she set some of her stories in Calcutta although she does not live there, Jhumpa Lahiri replies:

I went to Calcutta neither as a tourist nor as a former resident—a valuable position, I think, for a writer. The reason my first stories were set in Calcutta is due partly to that perspective—the necessary combination of distance and intimacy with a place....As most of my characters have an Indian background, India keeps

cropping up as a setting, sometimes literally, sometimes more figuratively in the memory of the characters.(Houghton Mifflin)

The above statement can be extended and applied to inherited traditions that play such a crucial role in the lives of immigrant Indians in her stories. Moreover, Lahiri admits that she is heavily influenced by the experience of her parents as well as other first generation immigrants in the diaspora she grew up in.

As Lahiri mentions in the interview, distance is a necessary and valuable tool for a writer to maintain objectivity while writing about a subjective experience. However, as Lahiri herself grew up in America, the Indian traditions and values she portrays in her stories are most likely to be either observations or handed down by her first generation parents. Thus, in a manner of speaking, her understanding of Indian culture and traditions carries a risk of being filtered and generalized. This provides an opening for the argument that Jhumpa Lahiri falls victim to the representation of India's complex and rich culture as a homogenous set of rules and ideals that opposes individual expression of freedom, a view that non-traditional societies are often guilty of. In her review of *The Namesake*, Vennila Kain offers a scathing attack on Lahiri's portrayal of India and its people. She observes, "Her India and Indians are clumsy, awkward, desperately out of place..." and states that the novel "may possibly be titled 'The minority's guide to social climbing' or 'The model minority's attempt at sophistication and the resulting angst'." She writes:

Part of what is irksome about Ms. Lahiri is her complete lack of comprehension of most things Indian. Particularly the nuances that make us people. Her Rudyard

Kiplingish characters are disempowered and out of date. More detrimentally, she is providing as an Indian-American, a validation of all the circle-jerkers of Indophilia-the fictional exotic India of the Kamasutra and the Calcutta lepers, that is. ([www.tribes.org](http://www.tribes.org))

She also asserts, “Writers of color have to evaluate this fine balance, and one hopes in presenting a nuanced portrayal, chip away at established alien images of minority sub-cultures” (ibidem).

To be fair to Lahiri, two of her published works are collections of short stories, and the format employed thus may attribute to the accusation that she is guilty of portraying stereotypes that may prove detrimental considering her standing among the literary circle. Stereotypes notwithstanding, Lahiri is often praised for her nuanced examination of the diasporic experience, as Kate Flaherty writes in her review of *The Namesake*. She states that the novel has “a paradoxical capacity to voice the general experience of displacement,” and “how the cultural remnants of Russian, Bengali and American and the immediate sensuality lend force to the typically nebulous experience of heterogeneity” (Philament). As Lahiri’s works are often viewed as manifestations of diasporic tensions reminiscent of her own experience, the nuances of that experience are often unwittingly juxtaposed with the stereotypical representation of Indian culture and traditions.

The complex set of rules, values, beliefs and practices that constitute the construction of Indian culture is deeply invested in the idea of soul prevalent in the ancient religion of Hinduism. Thus, to an Indian who prescribes to the religion, the concept of culture is not merely a complex network of practices and rituals. The sense of culture is entwined with the belief in

transmigration of the soul and ultimate liberation from the illusory world. In this sense, the way of life that is encapsulated in Indian culture facilitates and enforces the attainment of this liberation from the cycle of life and death. Therefore, the significance of culture in India extends beyond the assertion of national identity to encompass the spiritual aspect of life.

In Jhumpa Lahiri's narratives, the traditions and values that the first generation immigrants center their lives on merely hints at the notion of culture that is invested with the soul as religion is not explicitly mentioned in these stories. Hence, in some ways, it would appear that Lahiri herself struggles to understand Indian culture. In an interview with *India-West*, Lahiri admits: "I'm lucky that I'm between two worlds. . . I don't really know what a distinct South Asian identity means. I don't think about that when I write, I just try to bring a person to life" (Tsering B1). In the story "Sexy" from *Interpreter of Maladies*, the American narrator Miranda recalls seeing a piece of fabric with a picture of the Hindu Goddess *Kali* in her Indian neighbour's house. Miranda, who was only a child then, describes the picture, "With one foot she crushed a struggling man on the ground. Around the body was a necklace composed of bleeding heads, strung together like a popcorn chain. She stuck her tongue out at Miranda" (96). Later, the story informs, "For months afterward she'd been too frightened to even to walk on the same side of the street as the Dixits' house" (*ibidem*). This episode in the story demonstrates that a mere superficial glance at the rich and complex religion can distort the perception of Indian culture.

In the discourse related to diaspora, one of the most important issues that are often highlighted is the experience of loss felt by immigrants who are transplanted into another culture. Diasporic dislocation comes with the consequence of separation from familiar and comfortable

environments, including family, friends and communities. This separation often translates to a feeling of loss and longing for the life left behind. In Lahiri's fiction, this sense of loss finds multiple expressions with different characters. Needless to say, loss is most profoundly manifested in the first generation immigrants who feel alienated in the new country. In "Mrs. Sen," the titular character's loss is expressed in the ways in which she meticulously tries to replicate the food practices of her home country. In *The Namesake*, Ashima's feeling of loss and longing is intensified by her experience of motherhood in a new country to the extent that she implores her husband to take her back to India.

Another manifestation of loss in the diaspora is the loss of culture or ethnic identity. In an interview in 2008, Jhumpa Lahiri states:

Some of the culture goes by the wayside, or the link is never made. I was aware of that myself when I had my kids. I really felt a sense that I was the end of a line, and that it was a very short line. I knew my parents had parents and so on, but to me, the universe was my parents and they were the far end and I was the near end.  
(Bookforum 2008)

In her stories, subsequent generations like Gogol, Ruma, Kaushik and others are in the process of losing the culture that their parents have painstakingly imparted on them. For the individuals of this generation, the presence of another culture overpowers their often diluted comprehension of their ethnic identity.

The first generations immigrants, on the other hand, have a more complex and detailed understanding of Indian culture and its significance because they had immersed themselves in

that culture before they cross over to the new country. As a result, this generation, especially the women, strive to uphold the values and customs that they imbibed in their home country. For these women, mere upholding of culture is not enough. They are invested in passing on the tenets of Indian culture to their children who are born in America. However, the influence of the dominant culture is so strong that it is difficult for them to succeed in this endeavor. In “The Third and Final Continent” from *Interpreter of Maladies*, the narrator states that he and his wife are concerned that the link to their culture would end with their death. Ashima too, admits that her children have deviated from the values and beliefs that she and her husband have lived by.

In the title story of *Unaccustomed Earth*, the mother’s adverse reaction to the announcement that Hema intends to marry an American, as well as her constant complaints about Hema’s adoption of American lifestyle indicate the pressure felt by these Indian parents to pass on their cultural legacy to their children.

Although religion does not feature heavily in Lahiri’s works, the concerns expressed in by these parents can be attributed to the association of culture with the transmigration of the soul found in the Hindu religion. In India, parenthood is aligned with the transmission of culture and in this context, the parents’ apprehension is natural for fear of death or discontinuity of culture. When the religious aspect of Indian culture is considered, the friction that is often seen between the second generation immigrants and their parents due to the imposition of cultural values cannot be simply attributed to narrow-mindedness or inadaptability.

In her study of South Asian writers in Britain, Yasmin Hussain reports, “Two types of women are presented within Indian women’s fiction, the conventional and the unconventional.

Both suffer from either conforming or choosing not to conform” (56). In Jhumpa Lahiri’s fiction, the first generation women fall firmly under the first category-the conventional. Hussain further states, “Firstly, the conventional woman suffers within the constraints of traditional culture” (ibidem). Moreover, in Lahiri’s stories, there is a glaring divide between the first generation and second generation women, and the latter can be categorised as the ones who do not conform to traditional culture-the unconventional. However, the divide can be superficial as “both suffer from either conforming or choosing not to conform” (ibidem). In a diasporic setting, the notion of conformity is further complicated by the presence of another culture in the form of the host country, and this suffering comes with multidimensional implications.

For the first generation women in Lahiri’s stories, their experience of alienation and isolation in a new country serves to magnify the importance of inherited values and traditions, and thus this often leads to a determination to maintain a connection with the country they left behind. When they are faced with the prospect of acculturating to the new country, they instead root their identity in the same values and ideals they carry over from their home country. As a result, they are generally not burdened by the search for identity which can turn out to be painful in a multicultural setting. Thus, while adherence to inherited values and traditions limit their prospect of breaking free from the restrictions placed on them by traditional gender roles, it also carries a potential to free them of possible tensions that plaque subsequent generations who have moved away from these values and traditions.

An important contributor to the isolation and alienation felt by the Indian immigrants is their perception of Western culture. In general, Indian culture, especially the area that pertains to

women's rights and freedom, is often perceived by the West as restrictive and stifling. Moreover, Western countries, especially America, are often projected as the epicenters of freedom. Thus, the immigrants' resistance of American society raises a question as to why these women refuse to yield to the supposedly freeing capacities of the country. If the perception of Indian culture by the West is distorted by bias and prejudice, the immigrants' perception of their host culture is not without fault either. The emphasis on freedom and individual choice prevalent in American society can be interpreted as permissive or detrimental to established morals. Lahiri admits, "My parents were fearful and suspicious of America and American culture when I was growing up" (Houghton Mifflin). Since adherence to cultural values and norms is deeply connected to the prospect of salvation in Hinduism, a departure from these values could imply a deviation from a religion that places so much emphasis on the continuation of the soul.

The present research is an attempt to analyze the dichotomy between the enabling capability of tradition to liberate the women from identity crisis in Lahiri's fiction and its power to confine them to narrow gendered spaces in a diasporic setting. It also examines the traditions and ideals that these women root their identity in, and interrogates the question of identity formation in the first generation women characters in Jhumpa Lahiri's narratives.

The first chapter which is an introductory chapter situates Jhumpa Lahiri as a writer of the Indian diaspora and presents an outline of Lahiri and her works. It also locates Lahiri among her contemporaries in the diaspora, namely Monica Ali and Bharati Mukherjee. The chapter also examines the ways in which Lahiri's portrayal of diasporic women differs from that of her contemporaries.



The second chapter titled “Examining the Ideals of Indian Womanhood” explores the notion of Indian womanhood and the ideals of femininity that permeates through all Indian cultures which carry across even to migrants in another country. It then examines how these internalized values are manifested in Jhumpa Lahiri’s female characters. The chapter also analyzes the role that inherited values and traditions play in shaping the experience of women in their adopted country.

In Indian society, the governing ideologies that dictate the position of women is complexly informed by religious and social processes, and the ideals of womanhood prevalent in this society is derived from myths that is found in the Hindu religion.

In Indian society, the goddess *Sita* from the Hindu epic *The Ramayana* is often held up as an ideal of womanhood that women must strive to emulate. *Sita’s* travails and sufferings in the epic are most commonly interpreted as being brought upon by her devotion to her husband. Thus, through this interpretation, *Sita* embody devotion, self-sacrifice, docility and chastity. The construction of the ideal Indian woman as embodying the virtues exhibited by *Sita* contributes abundantly in shaping the understanding of Indian womanhood and femininity, permeating across most societies in India. Women in India are conditioned to imbibe these qualities right from childhood and the ideal women are those that align themselves with these same qualities.

In Lahiri’s narratives too, the immigrant women carry this notion of ideal womanhood when they relocate to another country. Thus, in these stories, the first generation immigrant women like Ashima in *The Namesake*, and Ruma’s mother in *Unaccustomed Earth* conduct themselves in accordance with the traditions and values that they have internalized even in the country of their exile.

The third chapter is titled “The Problem of Identity for Migrant Bengali Women.” In this chapter, the complex issue of identity formation pertaining to the first generation women in Lahiri’s stories is examined.

The search for identity remains one of the principal tensions that are found in the study of diaspora, and this conundrum is explicitly expressed in the second generation immigrants in Lahiri’s stories. However, a study of their first generation women counterparts reveal a dichotomy that does not fit into the conventional understanding of identity formation. The implication of a hybrid identity that is often associated with diasporas around the world is the internalization of the influence of the host culture in the process of identity formation in a multicultural setting. For women immigrants who hail from traditional societies where gender roles are established and rigid, hybridization often connote a deliberate departure from inherited identity to embrace the enabling capacities of a more liberal and open society. The general understanding of tradition is that it restricts the freedom and individuality of a woman in a strict patriarchal society. Thus, the implication is that a liberal society would be conducive to a new empowered identity for women.

When the first generation women in Jhumpa Lahiri’s stories are found to be resistant to the influence of American culture, their perspective of the new country becomes limited and is often liable to mistrust and distortion. Their inability to adapt to their new environment further intensifies their homesickness and alienation. On the other hand, taking refuge in the native culture also empowers them to create agencies that would mitigate their painful experience of exile. In this manner, first generation women in Lahiri’s stories become instrumental in creating a community that disseminates their cultural values in the host country. Hence, while rooting

their identity in the traditional values of the homeland limits their potential to transcend narrow gendered spaces, it also empowers them to become agents of their native culture, and in this manner, they are empowered to be the carriers and preservers of their culture.

In Jhumpa Lahiri's stories, food, language, customary and religious practices all serve as mediators that connect the immigrants to their homeland, and women play a crucial role in the utilization of these means in the formation of community bonds. Thus, in their self-imposed isolation from the culture and practices of the homeland, these women become the enabler of cultural agencies that constitute a resistance against the influence of the dominant culture where they are placed in. In this context, women precede men as they contribute abundantly in the enrichment of the native culture's practices, customs and values even in the country of their exile.

Jhumpa Lahiri articulates her experience of rootlessness:

I have somehow inherited a sense of exile from my parents, even though in many ways I am so much more American than they are...I think that for immigrants, the challenges of exile, the loneliness, the constant sense of alienation, the knowledge of and longing for a lost world, are more explicit and distressing than for their children...but it bothered me growing up, knowing that there was no single place to which I fully belonged. (Houghton Mifflin)

The above statement testifies that the painful experience of isolation and alienation is universal to those that cross national border to plant their feet in another land. However, the ramifications of this experience vary within the diaspora, as Bhagabat Nayak states:

While asserting their individual and national identities as a spiritual odyssey, these expatriates, diasporas and immigrants are neither capable to cast off their inherited cultural legacy nor are they able to encapsulate themselves in a new socio-cultural environment. As a result of which they experience a contra-acculturation and hybridization in their attempt to syncretise the two. (132)

In Lahiri's stories, while second generation immigrants like Gogol, Kaushik and Moushumi are examples of a hybrid identity that results from their multicultural upbringing, the first generation women root their identity in the culture of their native country. This contra-acculturation exhibited by these women has far-reaching implications that interrogate the very question of identity reconstruction that have become synonymous with the study of diaspora.

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**APPENDICES**

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<b><u>DEGREE</u></b>	<b>: M.Phil</b>
<b><u>TITLE OF DISSERTATION</u></b>	<b>: Situating Women in the Diasporic Narratives of Jhumpa Lahiri</b>
<b><u>DATE OF PAYMENT OF ADMISSION</u></b>	<b>: 29.07.2013</b>
<b><u>(Commencement of First Semester)</u></b>	
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<b><u>APPROVAL OF RESEARCH PROPOSAL-</u></b>	
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2. SCHOOL BOARD	: 09.05.2014
3. REGISTRATION NO. & DATE	: MZU/M.Phil/184 of 09.05.2014
4. DUE DATE OF SUBMISSION	: 31.07.2015
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HSC	Maharashtra State Board	2006	I	60
B.A	Mumbai University	2009	I	63.17



M.A	Mumbai University	2012	II	57.75
M.Phil	Mizoram University	Course Work Completed in 2013	I 'A' Grade awarded .10 pt. scale grading system, 'A' corresponds to 6-6.99 pts.	Corresponds to 60% in terms of percentage conversion

**M.Phil Regn. No. and Date** : **MZU/M.Phil/184 of 09.05.2014**

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1. Currently working on M.Phil dissertation titled, "Situating Women in the Diasporic Narratives of Jhumpa Lahiri" under the supervision of Dr. Sarangadhar Baral, Professor, Department of English, Mizoram University.
2. Awarded the UGC-MZU Fellowship for the tenure of eighteen months from the date of admission on 29<sup>th</sup> July 2013.
3. Research for the present dissertation done in the following places:
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- National Library, Kolkata
- American Council Library, Kolkata
- British Council Library, Kolkata
- Calcutta University Library, Kolkata
- Jadavpur University Library, Kolkata
- Presidency College Library, Kolkata