CHAPTER 4

THE POETICS OF HYPHENATED IDENTITIES IN THE WOKS OF JHUMPA LAHIRI

"The very organicity of the family and the community, displaced by travel and relocation must be renegotiated and redefined. The two generations have different starting points and different givens. This phenomenon of historical rupture within the "same" community demands careful and rigorous analysis. The older generation cannot afford to invoke India in an authoritarian mode to resolve problems in the diaspora, and the younger generation would be ill-advised to indulge in a spree of forgetfulness about "where they have come from". It is vital that the two generations empathize and desire to understand and appreciate patterns of experience not their own" (Radhakrishnan 206).

According to Jhumpa Lahiri, answering in an interview, the question of identity is 'a difficult one' for both, - those displaced due to immigration as well as those who grow up in 'two worlds simultaneously'. Lahiri writes about the experiences of first time migrants in America, those who are born or brought up in the United States of America. Her short story collections – *The Interpreter of Maladies* and *Unaccustomed Earth*, and the novel *The Namesake* are based on the experiences of her parents and their friends, and her own experiences as a second generation diaspora. Talking about her two short story collections Lahiri states that in *The Interpreter of Maladies* the characters move to America for more or less the same reason, which was also the reason for which her parents moved to the United States, - for opportunities or a job

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I

a. Idea of 'home' and identity:

According to McLeod, the concept of 'home' connotes 'shelter, stability, security and comfort'. It defines our identity and a sense of 'our place in the world'. Home

also refers to a place where we are welcome and comfortable, that is, where we feel 'at home' with people similar to us. But for the diaspora, "home becomes primarily a mental construct built from the incomplete odds and ends of memory that survive from the past. It exists in a fractured, discontinuous relationship with the present" (211). For the diaspora 'home' is left behind and they constantly live with a sense of nostalgia for the homeland. This leads to a feeling of alienation amongst the immigrants in the host country. According to Jhumpa Lahiri, the sense of exile and loneliness, and longing for 'home' is more explicit and distressing among the immigrants than their children, as cited by Das (177).

The protagonists of Jhumpa Lahiri's novel *The Namesake*, Ashima and Ashoke are first generation migrants. Ashoke had moved to America for higher studies and better prospects. Ashoke and Ashima had an arranged marriage. After their marriage Ashima had moved to Boston to join her husband. Ashima is unable to assimilate into the American culture and longs to be home, in Calcutta. "Home is not simply where one lives. It is one's identity national, cultural, and spiritual. Home is security, exile, the loss of home, is uprooting. The immigrant faces the dilemma of being unable to return home and yet not finding a home in the adopted land, they muster hope that they will be able to merge into the culture of the new land" (Prasad 221). When the novel opens, Ashima is standing in the kitchen preparing a modified version of *Bhel Puri*, a famous Indian street food. She is pregnant, but is unable to reconcile to the idea of motherhood in a foreign land, "that it was happening so far from home, unmonitored and unobserved by those she loved . . . She is terrified to raise a child in a country where she is related to no one, where she knows so little, where life seems so tentative and spare" (6). Lying in the hospital labour room she misses her family back in Calcutta. She remembers vividly every detail of her parents' and brothers everyday activities at half-past eight in the evening back home. She remembered every detail of the sitting room in her parents' house in Calcutta, where she spent all her life till she got married. There is a sudden surge of emotion as Ashima does not feel anything about the past eighteenth months in Boston to be normal. Nayar aptly points out:

> Much of diasporic writing explores the theme of an original home. This original home as now lost - due to their exile – is constantly worked into the imagination and myth of the displaced individual/community. Nostalgia is therefore the key theme in diasporic writing (191).

For Ashima, a trip to India materializes only when Gogol, her son, is a year old. However, Ashima regrets that they are unable to go earlier 'in time for Durga Pujo', as it would be years before Ashoke would be eligible for a sabbatical. She shops for her parents and relatives. She dreams of her trip 'home' in the train, as she returns from her shopping. She closes her eyes and pictures her parents' flat, in their room with Gogol in his American clothes lying on her parents' four poster bed. She pictures her father with a missing tooth which he had lost after a recent fall that her mother had mentioned in her letter. Ashima tries to visualize her grandmother who may not recognize her any more.

In 1971 Ashoke and Ashima move to a University town outside Boston, where they are the only Bengalis. Ashoke has been hired as an Assistant Professor of the Electrical Engineering Department and earns well. It was Ashoke's dream job. However, for Ashima life becomes more 'drastic, more distressing, as compared to the 'move from Calcutta to Cambridge'. She wished they had stayed in some city rather than in a suburb.

> Though no longer pregnant, she continues, at times, to mix Rice Krispies and peanuts and onions in a bowl. For being a foreigner Ashima is beginning to realize, is a sort of lifelong pregnancy – a perpetual wait, a constant burden, a continuous feeling out of sorts. It is an ongoing responsibility a parenthesis in what had once been ordinary life, only to discover that that previous life has vanished, replaced by something more complicated and demanding. Like pregnancy, being foreigner, Ashima believes, is something that elicits

> the same curiosity from strangers, the same combination of pity and respect (TN 50).

Ashima is 'despondent, unaccustomed all over again', being on her own again in the suburbs, with Gogol away for hours at the nursery school. To overcome loneliness, she goes to a public library, where she sits in the reading room, writing letters home, reading magazines or one of her Bengali books. After some time Ashoke buys a house on Pemberton Road, 'the small patch of America to which they lay claim'.

We come across similar instances in Lahiri's first short story collection *The Interpreter of Maladies,* for which she had won the prestigious Pulitzer award. For instance, in the story 'Mrs. Sen's', the protagonist's experiences as a new immigrant in America are narrated through Eliot's point of view, an American child whom she baby-sits. Eliot notes that Mrs. Sen refers to India as 'home' where 'everything is there'. Mrs. Sen laments that Mr. Sen had brought her to a place where there is so much silence that she 'cannot sometimes sleep in so much silence'. Based on Mrs. Sen's descriptions one can understand that she comes from boisterous surroundings full of family and community activities. Suddenly after marriage she experiences a monotonous silence in the Boston apartment, alienation and loneliness, which she is unable to reconcile to. She deplores the privacy that the Americans celebrate, as Das points out:

> Her (Mrs. Sen's) talks with Eliot often bring out sharp differences between India and America, and of course, she misses India . . . Consequently, in America, Mrs. Sen misses everything, from the fishes of Calcutta to the close social bonding. America individualism or 'exceptionalism', for that matter, is something she simple cannot relate to (27).

There were only two things that made Mrs. Sen happy, one, the letters that arrived from her family and the other was 'fish from sea side'. She would check her mailbox everyday eagerly praying for some mail. When she received mail she is ecstatic, and read the mail a number of times. The letters communicate happy as well as sad news

which made Mrs. Sen yearn to go back to India. The trips to India never seemed to materialize, as the Sens had to wait till Mr. Sen got his tenure. Mrs. Sens' marriage is a disappointment too. There is nothing grand or fantastic about her life in America as she had imagined before her marriage or as her relatives believed. According to her, "They think I live the life of a queen . . . she looked around the blank walls of the room. They think I press buttons and the house is clean. They think I live in a palace" (IM, 125). There is hardly any love lost between Mr. and Mrs. Sen, further intensifying Mrs. Sen's alienation and nostalgia, which Eliot seemed to understand, but not Mr. Sen. Eliot is the witness to Mrs. Sen's desperation to go back 'home' and her final nervous breakdown. Her distress is profound when she asks Eliot how long it would take her to reach Calcutta if she drove 'all the ten thousand miles, at fifty miles per hour'.

The title of Lahiri's new short story collection *Unaccustomed Earth* (2008) is metaphoric, reflecting the alienation of the first generation migrants in America, while also referring to the alienation of the second generation from their roots – India, which their parents refer to as 'home'. In the first story, by the same name as the title of the collection, Ruma, the protagonist's parents had settled in Pennsylvania after their marriage. For them India had always been 'home' and visiting India had been an unquestioned fact and 'the only thing worth boarding the plane for'. After his wife's death, Ruma's father was enjoying a carefree life of retirement touring Europe. He recollects the days with his wife and their trips to India. "No matter how they went, those trips to India were always epic, and he still recalled the anxiety they provoked in him, having to pack so much luggage and getting it all to the airport, keeping documents in order and ferrying his family safely so many thousands of miles. But his wife had lived for these journeys . . . those returns to India had been a fact of life for him, and for all their Indian friends in America" (UE, 8).

b) Following Indian culture and traditions:

According to McLeod, the migrants try to set up a home in the new country, which also disturb the concept of 'home'. "Migrants tend to arrive in new places with

baggage; both in the physical sense of possessions or belongings, but also the less tangible matter of beliefs, traditions, customs, behaviours and values" (211). This is portrayed in minute details like for instance; Ashima does not call her husband by his name 'for propriety's sake'. All the first generation female immigrants/protagonists wear Saris and other cultural markers like bindi on their forehead and vermilion powder in the parting of their hair, which exhibits their married status. Ashima in the novel *The Namesake*, Mrs. Sen in the story 'Mrs. Sen's' and Mala in the story 'The Third and Final Continent' in Lahiri's short story collection *The Interpreter of Maladies*, Usha's mother, Aparna in the story 'Hell-Heaven' and Hema's mother in the story 'Once in a Lifetime' from Lahiri's new short-story collection *Unaccustomed Earth* dress like traditional married Bengali women. Like for instance, Eliot notes that Mrs. Sen always wears Saris and puts vermilion in the parting of her hair and forehead, which looked as if she were bleeding. Mrs. Sen explains to Eliot that it was a part of her culture that she needs to follow rest of her married life, as it symbolizes her married status like a wedding ring does in America.

> Exiles tend to hold on to their traditions in an almost desperate effort to retain/reclaim their 'original' culture . . . caught up in a 'national' culture in whose cultural life the migrant community may have litte or no role to play (this is especially the case with first generation immigrant communities since their participation in the adopted nations's life may be minimal), the community clings to its own customs and cultural codes (Nayar 195).

When Gogol is around six months old Ashoke and Ashima decide to celebrate his 'annaprasan', - rice ceremony. One of their friends is requested to play the role of Ashima's brother, who would hold the six-month old Gogol on his lap and feed him rice. Gogol is dressed traditionally like a Bengali groom. The ceremony starts with a handful of women ululating. Baby Gogol is entranced by the ritual and willingly accepts all the food he is offered, which makes Ashima sad and nostalgic. "He takes his payesh three times. Ashima's eyes fill with tears as Gogol's mouth eagerly invites the spoon. She can't help wishing her own brother were here to feed him, her own parents to bless him with their hands on his head" (TN 40). As Gogol grows older,

Ashima teaches him ‘four-line children’s poems’ by Tagore, the names of all the deities like the ‘ten-headed Durga’ seen during Pujo, God Kartik on his peacock, Lord Ganesh on his mouse, so on and so forth. During Durga Pujo, Gogol and his sister Sonia are ‘dragged off’ for the traditional worship and celebrations. Ashima and Ashoke make it a point to take Gogol and Sonia to the Apu triology plays, or a Kathakali dance performance or a sitar recital to acquaint them to the Indian culture. When Gogol is in the third grade he is sent to ‘Bengali language and culture lessons’ conducted at the home of one of their Bengali friends.

In the story ‘Mrs. Sen’s’, Eliot learnt to remove his sneakers at the doorway before entering, following the example of the Sens. He enjoyed watching Mrs. Sen chopping vegetables with a blade that curved like ‘a prow of a Viking ship’. Mrs. Sen tells him that she brought the blade from India where it was an essential part of every household. She fondly described the community events and celebrations, which gives Eliot an insight into the Indian culture and way of life. “Whenever there is a wedding in the family . . . or a large celebration of any kind, my mother sends out word in the evening for all the neighbourhood women to bring blade just like this was, and then they sit in an enormous circle on the roof of our building, laughing and gossiping and slicing, fifty kilos of vegetables through the night” (TN 115). Mrs.Sen misses her life in India and feels lonely in America. The thought of her mother, in the story ‘Unaccustomed Earth’, reminded Ruma the traditions her mother unfailingly followed, which Ruma loathed. Her mother would not take her meals without serving her husband, running the household as if she were trying to satisfy ‘a mother-in-law’s fastidious eye’ and never getting an appreciation though she was a wonderful cook. Sharada Iyer reinforces the argument when she says, “Her (Lahiri’s) stories though set in America are scattered with details of traditional Indian names, food, cooking and wardrobe giving character and flavour to her stories” (Prasad 224).

c) Community life (Bengalis) in America:

In order to overcome the sense of nostalgia and alienation the migrants seek out fellow nationals and spend time in community-building. As Lahiri points out in one of

her interviews, "My understanding of the immigrant experience is more-or-less based on the life with my parents watching them and seeing how they negotiated life in a new land and I suppose, inheriting some of their distance from the United States as a result. I have been surrounded by immigrants all my life because of my parents and friends they had and now in my adult life as well, for other reasons". (www.ubspectrum.com/news/view.php/264056/An -Interview-with-Jhumpa-Lahiri). As Gogol grows up, Ashima and Ashoke's friend circle of Bengalis grows, however, the members of their 'former lives', who knew them not by their good names but as Monu and Mithu 'dwindle'. Both Ashima and Ashoke are 'orphaned'. Ashoke loses his parents to cancer, while Ashima's mother dies of kidney disease.

> In some senses Ashoke and Ashima live the lives of the extremely aged, those for whom everyone they once knew and loved is lost, those who survive and are consoled by memory alone. Even those family members who continue to live seem dead somehow, always invisible, impossible to touch. Voices on the phone occasionally bearing news of births and weddings send chills down their spines. How could it be, still alive, still talking? The sight of them when they visit Calcutta every few years feels like a dream. Once back on Pemberton Road, in the modest house that is suddenly mammoth, there is nothing to remind them; in spite of the hundred or so relatives they've just seen, they feel as if they are the only Gangulis in the world (TN 63-64).

Ashima is approached by Bengali bachelors inquiring her origins, as she takes Gogol in her stroller for an outing. Each of these bachelors, later fly back India, one by one, to marry. Most of these young men are researchers, engineers, teachers or doctors. Their wives 'home sick and bewildered' turn to Ashima for advice and consolation.

Mr. Pirzada, in the story 'When Mr. Pirzada came to Dine', is a lecturer in Botany at the University of Dacca. He had come to America on a grant from the government of Pakistan in 1971. Lilia, the ten-year old narrator of the story, is not surprised when Mr. Pirzada is invited to their house. She knew her parents had a large number of Indian acquaintances. Her parents, first generation migrants, "In search of compatriots, (used to) trail their fingers, at the start of each new semester, through the

columns of the university directory, circling surnames familiar in their part of the world" (IM, 24). They had discovered Mr. Pirzada in this manner and had invited him to their house. "Diasporas often *mobilize a collective identity*, not only a place of settlement or only in respect of an imagined, putative or real homeland, but also *in solidarity with co-ethnic members in other countries*. Bonds of language, religion, culture and a sense of a common fate impregnate such a transnational relationship and give to it an affective, intimate quality that formal citizenship or long settlement frequently lack" (Cohen 7).

In the story 'Unaccustomed Earth', Ruma reminiscences how wonderfully her mother had adapted to America inspite of the fact that it was a foreign land. However, Ruma's parents had formed their circle of Bengali friends in Pennsylvania and New Jersey. In the story 'Hell Heaven', Pranab Chakraborty was introduced to Usha's parents in the seventies. He was from a wealthy family of Calcutta, and had come to America to study engineering at MIT. His graduate life in Boston was a shock for him and within a month he had lost nearly twenty pounds. He had followed Usha and her mother Aparna, when they were taking a walk around Massachusetts Avenue. He had tapped on her mother's shoulder and inquired if she were a Bengali, inspite of the fact that her appearance clearly gave away the fact that she was a Bengali. Aparna, who felt lonely and nostalgic, finds a great company in Pranab as they share a lot of things in common to their delight. Usha is taught to address Pranab as 'kaku' while Pranab addressed Usha's parents as 'Shymal Da' and 'Boudi'. In the story 'Once in a Lifetime', Hema's mother had met Kaushik's mother when she was expecting Hema. Kaushik's mother had noticed a young Bengali woman, in a sari and vermilion in hair, feeling sick and dizzy and had offered help. Both, Kaushik's and Hema's mothers belonged to Calcutta, though they came from different backgrounds. However, those differences were irrelevant in Cambridge, as they both were lonely and nostalgic; they became friends instantaneously. They shopped together, complained about their husbands and cooked together and shared the food. Kaushik's parents are the only visitors to the hospital when Hema is born.

II

Talking about the conflicting relation between the first generation immigrants and their America born children, Lahiri states that:

> My parents were fearful and suspicious of America and American culture when I was growing up. Maintaining ties to India, and preserving Indian traditions in America meant a lot to them. They're more at home now, but it's always an issue, and they will always feel like and be treated as, foreigners here . . . when I was a child it was harder for me to understand their views. At times I felt that their expectations from me were in direct opposition to the reality of the world we lived in. Things like dating, living on one's own, having close friendships with Americans, listening to American music and eating American food – all of it was a mystery to them . . . As a young child, I felt that the Indian part of me was unacknowledged, and therefore somehow negated, by my American environment, and vice versa. I felt that I led two very separate lives (Das 177-78).

A similar conflict, as stated by Lahiri in her interview, is reflected in her novel and short stories, among the first generation migrants and their children.

For Ashima and Ashoke life changed drastically as they let go a number of things for the sake of Gogol and Sonia. For the sake of the children they learn to roast turkeys, but with Indian spices, celebrate Christmas, wrapping scarves around snow men, celebrating Easter because these were the events and festivals the children used to look forward to eagerly than 'worship of Durga and Saraswati'. Ashima and Ashoke let Gogol and Sonia fill the cart with items that only they consumed. At Gogol's insistence, Ashima prepared him American dinner once in a week and for his lunches she made 'sandwiches with bologna or roast beef', 'Shake n Bake chicken or Hamburger Helper' with ground lamb. Gogol loathed the Bengali classes, but for Ashima and Ashoke it was unsettling that their children sounded like Americans, "expertly conversing in a language that still at times confounds them, in accents they are accustomed not to trust" (TN 65). Gogol preferred his drawing class than learning

Bengali, like the other America-born Indian kids, who studied Bengali without any interest, 'wishing they could be at ballet or soft ball practice instead'.

Gogol is told about the legacy of the Ganguli surname on a visit to India; he had felt proud of it. On return to America he had helped his father put up a name plate on the mailbox. However, one day he discovered that the name had been distorted and changed into 'Gangreen' by some mischievous Americans, because of which he feels insulted.

> "Though it is his last name, too, something tells Gogol that the desecration is intended for his parents more than Sonia and him. For by now he is aware, in stores, of cashiers smirking at his parents' accents, and of salesmen who prefer to direct their conversation to Gogol, as though his parents were either incompetent or deaf" (TN 68-69).

Gogol's birthday had always been an occasion for his parents to throw a party for their Bengali friends, for whom his mother prepared elaborate Bengali cuisines days beforehand and stuffed the refrigerator. This, Gogol noticed was less stressful for her than feeding his American friends who did not relish the Indian food she prepared. Gogol hated the trips to India, as there was nothing to do in Calcutta apart from visiting relatives. He had been to the Victoria Memorial, Zoo gardens, and planetarium several times. He laments that they had never been to Disneyland or Grand Canyon. There are endless Indian reference names, like – 'pishi', 'mama', 'maima', 'mashi', etc. that Gogol and Sonia had to remember for various relations, both on the paternal and maternal sides, which was quite a task for them. They could not simply address them as uncle or aunty. Their cousins and uncles and aunts question them endlessly about their lives in America. On seeing the photographs of their Pemberton house they exclaimed in wonder, 'carpets in the bathroom imagine that'. After returning from India, Ashima and Ashoke still felt they were 'in transit', while Gogol and Sonia are happy to be back home, the eight months spent in India were put behind, quickly forgotten, 'suddenly cumbersome, irrelevant to their lives'.

Gogol had no interest in his namesake, he detested his name. He feels conscious of his name and therefore unlike other American teenagers, he did not date girls or

attend proms. His good grades and lack of interest in girls assured his parents; they did not suspect that he was 'in his own fumbling way, an American teenager'. Sonia made no pretence, she attended parties, had a confident smile on her face. She cut off her shoulder length hair for a more asymmetrical style, looking every bit an American. Gogol felt more 'at home' in his room at Yale rather than at Pemberton. He makes the mistake of referring to New Haven as 'Home'. Ashima is astonished and remarks, "Only three months, and listen to you," she says, telling him that after twenty years in America, she still cannot bring herself to refer to Pemberton Road as home" (TN 108). At a panel discussion on Indian novels written in English, which he was forced to attend, to greet a distant cousin, who was a participant, Gogol came across the term 'ABCD' which stood for 'American-born Confused deshi', which in other words, he realized, referred to him. He knew that 'deshi' here meant 'countryman', that is Indian, as his parents and their friends referred to. They would always refer to India as 'desh', unlike Gogol, who never referred or related to India as 'desh'. He thought of India as the other Americans did. He detested the curiosity and awe his relatives and cousins expressed at his and Sonia's 'American accented English', which was a source of amusement for them. Gogol had no ABCD friends in college and avoided them as they "remind him too much of the way his parents choose to live, befriending people not so much because they like them, but because of a past they happen to share" (TN 119). It is a 'past' that Gogol and Sonia do not relate to, and a way of life which is quite contradictory to their American lives.

Gogol's girlfriend Maxine takes him on a vacation to New Hampshire. There Gogol realizes that he feels no nostalgia for the vacations he spent with his family, "he realizes now that they were never really true vacations at all. Instead they were overwhelming, disorienting expeditions, either going to Calcutta, or sightseeing in places they did not belong to and intended never to see again. Some summers there had been road trips with one or two Bengali families, in rented vans going to Toronto or Atlanta or Chicago, places where they had other Bengali friends" (TN 155). These vacations might have meant a lot to his parents, but they hardly were vacations for him. He rather enjoyed the days he spent in New Hampshire with Maxine, her parents and grandparents, where there was privacy and freedom. Ashima did not want Maxine as her daughter-in-law, but her American friends at the library, where she begins to

work after Ashoke leaves for Ohio on a project, insist that she 'must be willing to accept'. Ashima laments that her children had become too independent and busy to even bother visit home. "Having been deprived of the company of her own parents upon moving to America, her children's independence, their need to keep their distance from her, is something she will never understand. Still, she had not argued with them. This, too, she is beginning to learn" (TN 166). Ashima could not help comparing her life in America to that of her children's. Inspite of the fact that she had tried her best to instil the Indian cultural values and traditions in them, she realizes that she had given birth to 'vagabonds', who kept moving to 'a new room every year'. In comparison to her children, "in her own life Ashima had lived in only five houses: her parents' flat in Calcutta, her in-laws' house for one month, the house they rented in Cambridge, living below the Montgomerys, the faculty apartment on campus, and, lastly, the one they own now. One hand, five homes. A life time in a fist" (TN 167).

As Usha, the second generation migrant and narrator of the story 'Hell Heaven', grows up; she behaves more like an American inspite of her indoctrination in the Indian culture. Inspite of her mother, Aparna's, forbidding her to attend dances and going on dates, she does so secretly. At some point Aparna had to accept the fact that Usha was 'not only her daughter but a child of America'.

> Many adults struggle to hold on to what they once knew in their circle of friends being largely other Bengali expatriates who are strangers in a strange land. The children, often born in United States, are more connected to the states. The Bengali culture is slipping away with each succeeding generation. Parents consider India as "home", while the children only endure those repeated trips back there. "Home" for children is where they now live, a home with a new set of mores, language, dress and relationships. There is a definite generational conflict. The children seldom read or speak Bengali. They serve as "cultural translators" for their parents in this new land, a phenomenon that is happening among any number of immigrant families in schools today.
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> (contemporarylit.about.com/od/shortfiction/fr/unaccustomed.htm)

Sudha and Rahul fail to understand their parents' nostalgia for their homeland. They remember their trips to India, ". . . Sudha was reminded of all those trips they'd taken together in childhood to see their relatives, trips that would never take place again" (UE, 164). Sudha liked the unkempt homes of her American friends 'cramming and piled with things', as compared to her home, which her mother ran in a systematic pattern. Difficulties in adapting to the American way of life and Rahul's birth changed Sudha's parents and their lives drastically. Her mother did not work. Her father gave up his 'mod suits'. Living in Wayland was a shock they could never overcome from. They became "passive, wary, the rituals of small town New England more confounding than negotiating two of the world's largest cities" – Calcutta and London (UE, 138). They relied more on Sudha to explain the American way of life, to call the repair department at Lechmere to get their appliances serviced. They depended on Sudha's 'perfect English' and her understanding of the American culture. Rahul never shared Sudha's sense of duty towards their parents.

> Like many children of immigrants Ms. Lahiri's characters are acutely aware of their parents' expectations; that they get into an Ivy League school, go to med school or grad school, marry someone from a good Bengali family. Deftly explicating the emotional arithematic of her characters' families, Ms Lahiri shows how some of these children learn to side step, even defy their parents' wishes. But she also shows how haunted they remain by the burden of their families' dreams and their awareness of their role in the generational process of Americanization. (www.nytimes.com)

Sudha studied hard to get her degrees, and moved to London to study at LSE. Whenever Sudha came home from London she 'gave herself fully to her parents'. She stayed at home helping her mother or spending time with her father watching Wimbledon of television, while Rahul remained aloof, busy with his own activities. Inspite of Sudha's attachment to her parents; she was frustrated by the fact that they never appreciated her achievements and her concern for them. Her father never let them forget that they (Rahul and Sudha) were fortunate, as there had been no one to help him, as he had helped them grow in the foreign land. He had no patience for

failure or indulgences as a result of this attitude, no matter how well Sudha did, she felt that her 'good fortune had been handed to her, not earned'. Her parents' never seemed to realize the problems they faced in an alien culture.

> Her parents had always been blind to the things that plagued their children: being teased at school for the colour of their skin or for the funny things their mother occasionally put into their lunch boxes, potato curry sandwiches that tinted Wonderbread green. What could there possibly be to be unhappy about? Her parents would have thought. "Depression" was a foreign word to them, an American thing. In their opinion their children were immune from the hardships and injustices they had left behind in India, as if the inoculations the paediatrician had given Sudha and Rahul when they were babies guaranteed them an existence free of suffering (UE, 143-44).

Sudha marries Roger and settles in London, while Rahul quits studies and his alcohol addiction becomes the cause of embarrassment for his parents. He becomes the topic of gossip for the other Bengalis, who prayed that their own children would not ruin their lives like him. He was considered a failure, "someone who was not contributing to the grand circle of accomplishments Bengali children were making across the country, as surgeons or attorneys or scientists, or writing articles for the front page of *The New York Times*" (UE, 151). Sudha was one amongst the sucessful children in the community with her collection of higher degrees.

When Gogol is in college at Columbia, Ashoke receives a prestigious grant to 'direct research for a corporation' in Cleveland for which he was required to stay in Ohio for nine months. Ashima stays back alone at Massachusetts in their Pemberton house. After Ashoke's departure, Ashima spends time 'addressing Christmas cards', from three different address books she made over the decades. She felt proud of herself for each of the record with entries of all the Bengali friends that she and Ashoke made over the years. They were the people with whom she had had the 'fortune to share rice with in a foreign land'. Whenever Ashima felt lonely she read the letters her dead parents had written to her regularly, which she had saved in a 'large white purse' kept on the top shelf of her closet. "She revisits their affection and

concern conveyed weekly, faithfully, across continents – all the bits of news that had nothing to do with her life in Cambridge but which had sustained her in those days nevertheless" (TN, 160-61). This had been her only solace from her early days in Boston, for the alienation and nostalgia she felt on migrating to America. Ashoke had noticed how 'her life in Cambridge, as his wife, has already taken a toll'. He would come home from university and sometimes find Ashima in bed rereading her parents' letters.

> "Assimilation, in Lahiri's fiction, is about coming to terms with disorientation. It is about *not* fitting in or settling down, *not* starting over from scratch and freely forging a new identity or destiny. Her characters balance precariously between two worlds—not just Asian and Western, but inner and outer, traditionally circumscribed and daringly improvised, unwilled and willed—and they do so not just transitionally, but permanently." (http://www.slate.com)

With Ashoke in Ohio and her children away, Ashima feels lonely in the Pemberton house. "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. "It's not such a big deal," her children tell her. "Everyone should live on their own at some point". 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" (TN, 161). She had been working in a library and lately had begun working at the main desk. She made many friends, most of whom had grown up children, or live alone since they are divorced. This was the first time ever she made American friends in her life. Ashoke comes home every three weekends. When he is home, Ashima cooks, cleans, washes as she used to do earlier, however, the visits always seemed to be 'too short to make a difference'. Ashoke did all the things that Ashima didn't know how to do, - raking the leaves on the lawn, paying the bills, putting gas in her car from self-service station. By Sunday, Ashima is left alone again. Alone in the Pemberton house, Ashima spends time addressing Christmas cards to all her relatives, friends, Ashoke, Sonia and Gogol. Despite all the years Ashima has lived in America she finds it difficult to assimilate into the American culture. She remained Indian to the

core, following the Indian traditions, her domestic chores, Indian style of dressing and food habits. Ashoke's sudden death comes as a great shock for Ashima. All the Bengali friends that Ashima and Ashoke had made in almost thirty years living in America attended Ashoke's last rites. "Friends suggest she go to India, see her brother and her cousins for a while. But for the first time in her life, Ashima has no desire to escape to Calcutta, not now. She refuses to be so far from the place where her husband made his life, the country in which he died. "Now I know why he went to Cleveland," she tells people, refusing even in death, to utter her husband's name. "He was teaching me how to live alone."" (TN, 183).

Identity serves as a link between an individual and the society in which s/he lives. An individual's identity defines who s/he is and what her/his relation to the world is. Through differences, identity marks an individual similar to others or different from others. Identities are 'produced, consumed and regulated within culture' by creating meanings through 'symbolic systems of representations' in relation to the identity positions adopted by the individual. As Jonathan Rutherford argues, ". . . identity marks the conjuncture of our past with the social, cultural and economic relations we live in now . . . [identity] is the intersection of our everyday lives with the economic and political relations of subordination and domination" (19-20).

According to Hall, there are two ways of thinking about 'cultural identity'; the first in terms of 'one shared culture'. "Within the terms of this definition, our cultural identities reflect the common historical experiences and shared cultural codes which provide us, as 'one people', with stable, unchanging and continuous frames of reference and meaning, beneath the shifting divisions and vicissitudes of our actual history" (Hall:1990, 111). This idea of cultural identity united the colonized people to fight against imperialism. It was possible for the colonized peoples to gain independence only through collective efforts. Their efforts gave rise to a Cultural Nationalism. This cultural nationalism gets manifested in the migrant's psyche in the form of a cultural identity, an identity that arises out of what Hall terms as 'one shared culture' as in the case of the first generation migrants like Ashima and Ashoke and the various older characters in Lahiri's two short story collections. Ashima and Ashoke

stick to their culture, follow the traditions, which they consider as an essential marker of their identity. They expand their friend circle within their community. By the time Gogol and Sonia have grown into adults, Ashima and Ashoke have a huge circle of Bengali friends spread all over America with whom they share food, celebrate festivals like Durga Puja and meet once in a while in get-togethers or parties. All this helps them to overcome the nostalgia and sense of alienation in a foreign land. Even towards the end of the novel, we find Ashima preparing Indian food for a Christmas party, the last party she hosts at Pemberton road. As she prepares the 'mincemeat croquettes' she recollects making the same in her kitchen at Cambridge, when she had first come to America. She remembers her husband helping her at the stove in his draw-string pajamas and a T-shirt.

> Even though assimilating, the representatives of the first generation immigrants are nevertheless cultural hybrids. They know their roots, but they also know that to achieve success they need to adapt to new cultural codes, which they inevitably do, because of the contact with another culture. To use Homi K. Bhabha's terms they live in the Third Space, characterized by in-betweenness. No purist view of identity applies to them because entering another culture they are "*neither the One … nor the Other … but something else besides* which contests the terms and territories of both. Their entrance into the Third Space is a deliberate act. Having the direct experience of the two worlds they are aware of what they leave behind in their homeland and what opportunities are offered in the new country. Thus they find it easier to define their new path of life and identify the goals of their American Dream. Although positioned as hybrid identities, their life is an inevitable progression towards assimilation, however fluid and unstable it may be, because as newcomers they have only this direction of transformation – to acquire
>
> (sometimes unconsciously) the elements of culture with which they come in contact" (http://worldlitonline.net/the-american-iwona.pdf).

However, as Hall points out, identity is also a matter of 'becoming'. In the late modern times, identities have become increasingly 'fragmented' and 'fractured'. Identities are no longer 'unified' they are constantly in the process of 'transformation' and change. Cultural identity in the second sense, as Hall explains, is:

> A matter of 'becoming' as well as of 'being'. It belongs to the future as much as to the past. It is not something which already exists, transcending place, time, history and culture. Cultural identities come from somewhere, have histories. But, like everything which is historical, they undergo constant transformation. Far from being eternally fixed in some essentialized past, they are subject to the continuous 'play' of history, culture and power. Far from being grounded in a mere 'recovery' of the past, which is waiting to be found, and which, when found, will secure our sense of ourselves into eternity, identities are the names we give to the different ways we are positioned by, and position ourselves within, the narratives of the past (Hall:1990, 112).

Thus, while Hall's one definition of cultural identity gives some 'grounding' and 'continuity with the past'; the other definition suggests an experience of 'a profound discontinuity'. Thus, Hall suggests, in his essay, *Questions of Cultural Identity* that, "We need to situate the debates about identity within all those historically specific developments and practices which have disturbed the relatively 'settled' character of many populations and cultures above all in relation to the process of globalization" (Hall & Guy 4). Globalization has had an altogether different effect on identity. It has promoted 'cultural homogeneity', which has led to the detachment of identity from community and place of origin. This detachment may lead to a resistance which could 'strengthen and reaffirm some national and local identities or lead to the emergence of new identity positions'. (Woodward 16).

Living with Ashoke all these years in Pemberton road house, Ashima had never felt a sense of identity crisis. Being an Indian, nostalgia for the home country, reluctance to assimilate into the American culture and enjoying a sense of community life, celebrating festivals and following traditions with other fellow Bengalis in America had become a way of life for Ashima. This way of life defined her identity in

America; secure in a secluded way of life that she and Ashoke shared. Ashima never realized that she would find herself in a vulnerable position on Ashoke's sudden death. However, in a way she realizes that by staying away from her in Cleveland, he had been preparing her for the inevitable. She decides to spend six months in India with her brother Rana and his family in Calcutta and six months with Gogol and Sonia, visiting her close Bengali friends in America. "True to the meaning of her name, she will be without borders, without a home of her own, a resident everywhere and nowhere" (TN, 276). Sonia is getting married and for the first time Ashima accepts her daughter's decision and feels happy for her. Ashima feels guilty for encouraging Gogol to marry Moushmi, who left him for another man. But Ashima is at the same time happy that Gogol is divorced, as she points out, "But fortunately 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 happiness. That pressure has given way, in the case of the subsequent generation, to American common sense" (TN, 276). Gogol is free again to find love and forge an identity for self.

Though Ashima plans to spend her time between India and America, Ashima for the first time finds herself facing identity crisis. She remembers the first time she had taken a flight to meet her husband, in the winter of 1967. She had been terrified then, but now the prospect of flying alone no longer terrifies her as, "She has learned to do things on her own, and though she still wears saris, still puts her long hair in a bun, she is not the same Ashima who had once lived in Calcutta. She will return to India with an American passport. In her wallet will remain her Massachusetts driver's license, her social security card" (TN, 276). Ashima suddenly feels extremely lonely and inconsolable, she feels overwhelmed at the prospect of moving to Calcutta, 'to the city that was once home and is now in its own way foreign'. For thirty-three years she had missed her life in India, now as she is about to leave for India, she feels nostalgic for the life she spent in America with Ashoke. She would miss throwing parties, working in the library; miss her friends at the library, driving past the engineering building, where Ashoke had worked, on her way home from the library. Suddenly she feels she would miss the country where she had come to know and love her husband. Though Ashoke's ashes had been scattered in the Ganges, Ashima knew that it was

‘here’, in the Pemberton house that Ashoke would continue to ‘dwell in her mind’. Ashima thought for a moment, what it would be like to do what her children had done, - falling in love first rather than getting married.

> It reminds her of their life together, of the unexpected life he, in choosing to marry her, had given her here, which she had refused for so many years to accept. And though she still does not feel fully at home within these walls on Pemberton Road she knows that this is home nevertheless – the world for which she is responsible, which she has created, which is everywhere around her; needing to be packed up, given away, thrown out bit by bit (TN, 280).

Gogol is perplexed by his mother’s decision to go to India. He begins to wonder how his parents had managed to leave their families behind and settle in America, ‘dwelling unconnected in a perpetual state of expectation, of longing’. He thinks of all those trips to Calcutta that he resented as a child, but which could not have been enough for his parents. He now realizes that his parents lived in America ‘in spite of what was missing’, with a stamina that he knew, he lacked. “He had spent years maintaining distance from his origins; his parents, in bridging that distance as best they could. And yet, for all his aloofness toward his family in the past, his years at college and then in New York, he has always hovered close to this quiet, ordinary town that had remained, for his mother and father, stubbornly exotic” (TN, 281). Gogol had been upset by Moushmi’s betrayal. He was completely shattered. Even after a year, though the shock had worn off, ‘a sense of failure and shame persisted deep within’. “Part of the burden they live with is unspoken ambivalence about elders who, against great odds, managed a feat that daunts their offspring. Well-aware of their own advantages—not least accent-free English and freedom from the old world custom of arranged marriage—these U.S.-born young adults still can't help feeling adrift.” (http://www.slate.com)

One last time Christmas is celebrated at Pemberton road in the honour of Sonia and Ben, who were engaged. At the party there are boisterous groups of Bengali uncles and aunts, who had seen Gogol, grow in front of their eyes. The people, at the

party, talked about how much they awaited Ashima's Christmas Eve parties and that it would never be the same without her. "They have come to rely on her, Gogol realizes, to collect them together, to organize the holiday, to convert it, to introduce the tradition to those who are new. It has always felt adopted to him, an accident of circumstance, a celebration not really meant to be. And yet it was for him, for Sonia, that his parents had gone to the trouble of learning these customs. It was for their sake that it had come to all this" (TN, 286). On a closer look at his family's life, he finds it like 'a string of accidents', beginning with his father's near-death train accident in India to his being named Gogol, which distressed him no end, to his marriage with Moushmi which was a 'misstep'. But losing his father was perhaps the worst of the accidents. "And yet these events have formed Gogol, shaped him, determined who he is. They were things for which it was impossible to prepare but which one spent a lifetime looking back at, trying to accept, interpret, comprehend. Things that should never have happened, that seemed out of place and wrong, these were what prevailed, what endured, in the end" (TN, 287).

While going through the unwanted miscellaneous things that his mother wanted him to take away or discard he comes across the short-story collection of Nikolai Gogol that his father had gifted him on his birthday in 1982. He remembers his father and the name 'Gogol' that he had detested, but 'the first thing his father had given him' which became a part of his identity. Suddenly he feels lonely as "The givers and keeper of Gogol's name are far from him now. One dead, another a widow, on the verge of a different sort of departure, in order to dwell, as his father does, in a separate world… 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" (TN, 289). His parents and all who were close to him, knew him as Gogol, a name which gave him the solace of being close to loved ones, were gradually slipping away. After being cheated by Moushmi, Gogol is unable to come to terms with his life and identity;

> Varied strands of marginalization, acculturation, hybridization, contra-acculturation and assimilation constitute his lived experience in the

> melting pot of the USA. He copes with them all, and endeavours, hard to move forward from the space of inbetweenness and liminality to some kind of steady ground and emerges towards the end of the book as a cultural survivor, intent to do away with his hyphenated existence. (Das 16-17)

The name that he once hated today is on the verge of being lost, with the loss of all those who were responsible for his name and identified him by that name. Now he is distressed at the prospect of losing his identity as Gogol. As he goes through the chronology of Nikolai Gogol's life, who died one month short of his forty-third birthday, Gogol wonders what life had in store for him; whether he would be married and have a child to whom he would give a name, he didn't know. He got a new job at a smaller architectural firm where he would be able to produce his own designs and there was a scope for professional growth. "There is a possibility, eventually, of becoming an associate, of the firm incorporating his name. In that case Nikhil will live on, publicly celebrated, unlike Gogol, purposely hidden, legally diminished, now all but lost" (TN, 290).

A research of Jhumpa Lahiri's fiction shows that she focuses mainly on the question of identity of her characters. "Inhabiting the fictional world of large-scale transnational migrations, in which borders of cultures are frequently traversed and need to be constantly negotiated, Lahiri's characters are identified as cultural hybrids, whose hyphenated identities are troubled by tension and anxiety. . . Lahiri encourages a celebration of hybridity but with a view to differences between generations of immigrants. The process of acculturation and growing roots into the host country, which for next generations becomes a homeland, is undeniably important and called for, nevertheless the awareness of one's origins is important" (http://worldlitonline.net/the-american-iwona.pdf). Jhumpa Lahiri defines the lives and conditions of the Indian diaspora, who are caught between two conflicting worlds with an ever increasing multiplicity of identities. Her novel *The Namesake* and the short-story collection *The Interpreter of Maladies* portray the lives of first generation diaspora who undergo cultural isolation which in turn results in personal isolation too. She draws for her stories from various aspects of her own Indian background, to project the life of the second generation diaspora like herself. *The Interpreter of*

Maladies and *The Namesake* focus on the identity crisis and isolation of the first generation migrants, which occurs as a result of their inability to reconcile their American identity with their Indian identity.

> Jhumpa Lahiri did not belong to the first generation immigrants, and hence, she did not explicitly face with the challenges or loneliness of the exile and the longing for a lost world. But like many immigrant offsprings, she too felt intense pressure to be loyal to the old world and fluent in the new. She could very easily identify the feelings of the children of immigrants of being neither one thing nor the other. She was torn apart, between the hyphenated identities of Indian - American, which has become a part of vocabulary in the beginning of this century. The traditions on either side of the hyphen dwelled in her like siblings, one outshining the other depending on the circumstances. In her debut novel, *The Namesake*, one can see this hyphenated identity so closely intertwined and green, yet always trying to cancel each other out. The need to connect to one's origins and yet to be part of this new land is important to all the characters in the novel. It is quite evident even in the locale of the novel. Hence, though the story of *The Namesake* is set in United States, Calcutta hovers in the background. It is out of her experiences of the bizarre identity crisis on the part of those who have remained as immigrants and those who were traumatized by homelessness, that the contents of the novel The Namesake were derived. Jhumpa Lahiri admits that as the novel conveys the experiences of alienation of the migrants from their roots, it is to some extent autobiographical. (http://worldlitonline.net/the-dialectics-of-identity.pdf)

As the novel ends, Gogol comes to terms with his identity crisis as he accepts that the answer was not to fully abandon or diminish either culture, but to accept the hyphenated status. He realizes that he does not have to be/choose one or the other, he is made by both, his identity is 'embellished by both cultures. Lahiri's new short-story collection *Unaccustomed Earth*, is an apt title and metaphor to represent the transformations that Lahiri describes in its pages. It represents the two generations of

Bengali immigrants to America, the 'newcomers and their hyphenated children', who struggle to 'build normal, secure lives' (http://www.nytimes). To conclude, R. Radhakrishnan reinforces what Lahiri attempts to draw through her works:

> My point is that the diaspora has created rich possibilities of understanding different histories. And these histories have taught us that identities, selves, traditions, and natures do change with travel (and there is nothing decadent or deplorable about mutability) and that we can achieve such changes in identity intentionally. In other words, we need to make substantive distinctions between "change as default or as the path of least resistance" and "change as conscious and directed self-fashioning" (Radhakrishnan 210).

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