CHAPTER 4

Jhumpa Lahiri’s
The Namesake and
Unaccustomed Earth:
Alienation of the Immigrants
The experience of alienation from the foreign land, the continent and its people is the reality of colonial enterprise.

- Stephen Clingman

Jhumpa Lahiri’s debut novel The Namesake (2003) presents the theme of cultural alienation and loss of identity that the immigrant faces while making a new home on a foreign land. The novel depicts the characters who are culturally, socially and psychologically alienated. They are cut-off from their roots and ethnicity. The cultural estrangement, as summarised by modern sociologist Melvin Seeman, dominates their social behaviour and they are oppressed, pushed aside, denied rights and treated poorly on an alien land. They feel estranged and isolated by the people of the other country. The title itself reveals the existential trauma of the culturally displaced character, Gogol. The title augurs the issue of identity crisis in a host culture. The idea of exile runs constantly throughout Lahiri’s oeuvre. Lahiri describes the feeling of rootlessness. “No country is my motherland. I always find myself in exile in whichever country I travel to, that’s why I was tempted to write something about those living their lives in exile.”

The novel depicts the story of a young Brahmin Bengali couple Ashoke and Ashima Ganguli who are brought together, as in most cases, by a traditionally arranged marriage. The couple moves to the U.S. soon after Ashoke completes his doctoral studies in Engineering at the MIT. The early details of their married life fill the first few pages of the novel, along with the birth of their son. The baby is hastily named Gogol by his father in order to obtain his discharge from hospital in the absence of the letter from Ashima’s grandmother that should have named the baby according to the Bengali tradition, but surprisingly the letter never arrives. Readers learn that the Russian author – Gogol – is not only Ashoke’s favourite author, but that his volume of short stories containing the famous story The Overcoat is connected with his survival from a train accident. Ashoke regards
the book as a supernatural blessing which has saved him from dying. After a period of five years the couple’s daughter Sonali (Sonia) is born.

Ashima’s journey is overshadowed by the feelings of alienation, isolation and the resulting despair stemming from these initial feelings and challenges. Lahiri informs that, “she was nineteen, in the middle of her studies and in no rush to be a bride.”² It is a terrible fate of Ashima that her exile brings the alienation from homeland, relatives and friends. That is why, even after having spent all her married life in the U.S., Ashima’s love for her native land overwhelms her mind. Her sense of alienation is aggravated as she always longs for going back to her native land. Ashima wanted her children to be educated in India. Anju Bhatt observes that the novel begins with the “pathetic portrayal of anxiety, uneasiness and various psycho-sociological problems such as nostalgia, alienation, schizophrenia experienced by Ashima who at the young age has migrated to a country where she is related to no one.”³ Twenty years old Ashima is eager to learn and to adapt to the new surroundings with Ashoke, a Ph.D. student at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT). Ashima becomes pregnant and the young couple is busy in enjoying the world around them with their baby. Especially during her pregnancy, Ashima’s sense of alienation, because of the distance from her native place, keeps on shooting up:

American seconds tick on top of her pulse point. […] She calculates the Indian time on her hands […] it is nine and a half hours ahead in Calcutta, already evening, half past eight. In the kitchen of her parents’ flat on Amherst Street, at this very moment, a servant is pouring after-dinner tea into steaming glasses, arranging Marie biscuits on a tray. It’s not so much the pain, which she knows, somehow, she will survive. It’s the consequence: motherhood in a foreign land. For it was one thing to be pregnant, to suffer […] That it was happening so far
from home, unmonitored and unobserved by those she loved, had made it more miraculously. (4-6)

Ashima regrets the fact that no one from her family was there to support her during her pregnancy. Moreover, after the birth of the child she does not want to raise her child into an alien land. She does not want her child to suffer the pangs of cultural alienation. She urges Ashoke to finish his work in U.S. and to return to India, where the child can absorb his own culture: “Without a single grandparent or parent or uncle or aunt at her side, the baby’s birth, like most everything in America, feels somehow haphazard, only half true. As she strokes […] her son, she can’t help but pity him. She has never known of a person entering the world so alone, so deprived” (23-24).

Ashima’s exile in a foreign land provides a sense of homelessness and displacement, which is identified with alienation by Freud, Marx, Durkheim and Homi Bhabha. Nigel Rapport, a Professor of Anthropological and Philosophical Studies at the University of St. Andrews, opines:

Displacement is identifying with modern alienation, anomie, homelessness, and depaysment, individual powerlessness and lack of control […] Displacement, seen as a phenomenon of modern social relations, as socially driven, is something which increasingly happens to people – something done to them; it is not something self-motivated which an individual might be consciously and creatively responsible for determining and effecting.”^4

As a displaced person, Ashima is uprooted from her social milieu. She tries to soften its impact in the company of her fellow Bengali friends who share the same sense of alienation. This Indian community abroad offers the Gangulis a family structure, a sense of communal belonging and facilitates them to sustain and uphold the Bengali customs and rituals. Participation in these rituals remains an important activity in the life of the
Gangulis. These activities sustain the Ganguli family amidst unknown community. Together, in this circle of friends they celebrate Hindu festivals, such as Diwali and Holi, in conjunction with the traditional American feast of Thanksgiving and Christmas, without the danger or awkwardness of these parallel worlds colliding with each other.

Before their marriage Ashima’s mother told Ashoke about Ashima’s skills as if she were destined to be confined in domesticity, “She is fond of cooking and she can knit extremely well. Within a week she finished this cardigan I am wearing” (7). Strangely, Ashima is “amused by her mother’s salesmanship” (7). Before entering the living room where her mother and Ashoke are conversing, Ashima notices a pair of shoes on the floor outside the door where visitors customarily leave them. She is mesmerised by the “initials U.S.A.” on Ashoke’s shoes and suddenly influenced by a strange curiosity, Ashima wore shoes in her feet. Like Ashima, Ashoke, too, is a product of the British education system. “As a teenager he had gone through all of Dickens. He read newer authors as well, Graham Greene and Somerset Maugham, all purchased from his favorite tall on College Street with pujo [ritual gift] money” (12). This was Ghosh, a visitor from England, who had sown the seed of diaspora in Ashoke’s mind. Ghosh spoke reverently of England. Initially, Ashoke resisted the temptation but Ghosh was quick to offer help if Ashoke decided to travel abroad, “If you ever change your mind and need contacts, let me know” (16). Soon, the books that he had read began influencing him and he decided to move out of his country. Similar stories of the influence of British education system in the post-independence India could be traced in the characters of Jemu and Jasmine in Kiran Desai’s The Inheritance of Loss and Bharti Mukherjee’s Jasmine, respectively. The sense of alienation and their departure from home country, temporary or otherwise, has been partly credited to the education system that India inherited from the British Raj. The surname “Ganguli” that Ashima assumes after the marriage “is a legacy of the British, an anglicized
way of pronouncing his real surname, Gangopadhyay” (67). After marriage, she spends two-third of her life cooking, hoping to please her husband. She quickly learns of Ashoke’s liking and disliking about food. But there is no riposte from him as if it were her destiny to serve the man to eternity.

At the time of their first-born child, the Gangulis face a difficult situation as the hospitals in the U.S. cannot wait a little longer for the proper naming of the child.

In India parents take their time. It wasn’t unusual for years to pass before the right name, the best possible name, to be determined. Ashima and Ashoke can both cite examples of cousins who were not officially named until they were registered, at six or seven, in school. The Nandis and Dr. Gupta understand perfectly. Of course, you must wait, they agree, wait for the name in his great grandmother’s letter. (25)

The Gangulis are forced to come up with an official name quickly or else the hospital would not release the new-born baby. As all the suggestions are off the table for various culturally conflicting reasons, the Gangulis have no choice but to accept the hospital official’s last one: “Then what about naming him after another person? Someone you greatly admire?” (28)

Ashoke decides to relate one incident of naming with an accident of his own life, the train-wreck that he survived due to the book he held in his hand, *The Short Stories of Nikolai Gogol*, by naming the child as Gogol after the author of the book. The name Gogol is supposed to be the baby’s pet name, “the name by which one is called, by friends, family, and other intimates, at home and in other private, unguarded moments” (16). In Bengali tradition, next task for the parents is to determine the child’s “good name, a bhalonam, for identification in the outside world” (16). The school system simply does not have the provision for accommodating the Bengali tradition of two names, so the school Principal, in her ignorance, practically denies Gogol the “good name”, “Nikhil.” “At the
end of the first day he is sent home with a letter to his parents from Mrs. Lapidus (the school Principal), folded and stapled to a string around his neck, explaining that due to their son’s preference he will be known as Gogol at school” (60), not Nikhil as the parents wanted in accordance with the tradition. The far reaching consequence of this cultural alienation is that Ashima, until late in her life, is emotionally disconnected and distanced from her child. After twenty-eight years in the U.S., Ashima finally takes her first job in America at a public library, where she makes her first American friends. It takes her forty-eight years to break the confines of domesticity. She has successfully rounded off her domestic duties, when her husband dies of a heart attack in Cleveland, she still refuses to utter the patriarch’s name out of reverence and maintains unflinching faith in his intention: “Now I know why he went to Cleveland. He was teaching me how to live alone” (183). Again the importance of name is harped on in this way in the novel. Later in the novel, after her husband Ashoke dies in Cleveland, Ashima, a young widow observes that her previous sense of belongingness has taken on a new dimension. She becomes all the more alienated due to this tragic shock. It manifests itself when she reflects over her circumstances: “But for the first time in her life, Ashima had 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 had died” (183).

This change of heart was a new feeling to Ashima. It marks the final cornerstone of her successful assimilation with foreign culture. It also testifies to the level of contentment and happiness that the couple established for themselves. It seemed a well managed journey in which the couple harnessed and profited from its multiple challenges and from which they both grew in experience. Ashima’s open-mindedness, tolerance, self-determination and resourcefulness paved the way for easy assimilation into a foreign culture. As her son Gogol’s failed marriage with Moushumi has become hopeless; Ashima
decides to live half the year in the U.S., and the other half, back in India with her relatives. As Ashima shuttles between the two cultures, she was torn between the conflicting feelings of joy and sorrow. On the one hand, “there is a thrill to whittling down her possessions to little more than what she’d come with […]” (278), and on the other hand, she experiences a sense of alienation, loss and abandonment from her familiar surroundings:

Ashima feels lonely suddenly, horribly, permanently alone, and briefly turned away from the mirror. She sobs for her husband. She feels overwhelmed by the thought of the move she is about to make, to the city that was once home and is now in its own way foreign. For thirty-three years she missed her life in India. Now she will miss her job […], throwing parties, living with her daughter. […] She will miss the opportunity to drive, miss the country in which she had grown to know and love her husband. Though his ashes were scattered into the Ganges, it is here, in this house and in this town that he will continue to dwell in her mind. (278-279)

Her already damp spirit due to the sense of alienation is crushed further by the sudden death of her beloved husband. But Ashima’s tale and journey takes on a new dimension as it is characterised by new ventures of hope and the embracement of new possibilities and roads. Ashima in The Namesake displays that her strength of character and unlimited self-assurance are symbolic: “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 is destined to travel back and forth between her two homes of choice, between the previous and the new one. Michel Foucault describes the concept of “utopia”, a place which does not physically exist: “Utopias are sites with no real place. They are sites that have a general relation of direct or inverted analogy with the real space of Society. They
present society itself in a perfected form, or else society turned upside down, but in any case these utopias are fundamentally unreal spaces."^5

Having accomplished the quest for this abstract sense of belonging, Ashima mastered herself proficiently and made herself capable of creating her very own, a sort of personal journey of arriving at home. Thus, Ashima tries to overcome her sense of alienation in a Hegelian way which requires human activity to create an objective order. This action also satisfied her essential need for self-actualization in the world.

The Gangulis’ wish is to raise Gogol and his sister with Bengali culture and values. But, Gogol and Sonia keep themselves aloof or alienated and, thus, grow up under the influence their peers and the surrounding culture in the U.S. The epitome of the family’s hybrid nature is underscored when they travel to India and at the airport Ashoke utters: “Four in the family,” his father says when it is their turn, producing two U.S. passports and two Indian ones. “Two Indian meals, please” (80). The children perceive themselves as part of the American landscape and from time to time, they privately admit to excruciating cravings. The children do not enjoy the time that they are forced to spend in India, a country with which they feel alienated and have a sort of aversion. When assessing the family’s mandatory trips to Calcutta, Gogol concedes: “[...] no nostalgia for the vacations he’s spent with his family, and he realizes now that they were never really true vacations at all. Instead they were overwhelming, disorientating expeditions, either going to Calcutta, or sightseeing in places they did not belong to and intended never to see again” (155). Unable to connect with their parents’ heritage and their homeland, Gogol and Sonia are relieved when they finally arrive back in Boston: “And so the eight months are put behind them, quickly shed, quickly forgotten, like clothes worn for a special occasion, or for a season that has passed, suddenly cumbersome, irrelevant to their lives” (88). Back in the U.S., Gogol is frightened by the struggle that partakes in forming a nexus
between Gogol and Nikhil. This initiates the qualms of conscience and an internal conflict that Gogol will face throughout his life. It affects his mirth and he alienates himself emotionally for he cannot come to terms with the impact the grammatical relativity of an assumed name has on the world around him. Bhabha’s definition of the “Third Space” and his discussion about scattered peoples of exiles and ‘émigrés’ can rightly be observed in case of the children. Gogol and Sonia feel as if they do not belong to anywhere; they feel cut off from India as well as America.

The protagonist Gogol begins a lonely journey carrying the sense of alienation throughout his life right from his birth to the middle age. His mental chemistry is crisis-cross that throws him into a dilemma as he finds a deep sense of alienation and failure in life. Gogol is a self-alienated person who, as Horney said in his theory of “alienation”, under the pressure of an adverse environment abandons his “real-self” and develops neurotic strategies for living. He constantly resists the urges to search for the meaning of his name and identity as a second-generation immigrant. The sense of rootlessness, its consequential anxiety and failure in love relations are characteristics of Gogol’s existential dilemma. He rebels against the socio-cultural pressures and pursues his quest for identity. Through self-probing and self-exploration, through perceptions of the past and isolated experiences of the present, he discovers the higher values of life. Gogol’s alienation, solitude, and loneliness are also similar to Fromm’s idea of “human isolation.”

Lahiri knows the meaning of this type of life very well. She distinguishes between the experiences of different generations of the diaspora emphatically. As Brati Biswas had quoted in her interview, Lahiri discusses her own experience and points out its significance in the larger context of the rest of such expatriate Indians. She says:

In fact, it is still very hard to think of myself as an American. 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. The feeling that there was no single place to which I fully belonged bothered me growing up. It bothers me less now.\textsuperscript{6}

This seems to be the story of not only Lahiri’s life, but also of Gogol alias Nikhil Ganguli in the novel. Gogol’s family is torn between the push and pull of the old age tradition of their homeland and the American way of life. Gogol is confronted with a multitude of challenges and obstacles, which he must overcome in order to successfully forge an identity and establish roots. The obstacles are three-fold: firstly, he is a stereotypical child of immigrants and he makes concerted efforts to try and fit into American culture and is keen to avoid being labelled as an “ABCD” i.e. ‘American Born Confused Desi.’ To accomplish this, he makes a conscious effort to alienate himself from his cultural heritage and, thus, disassociates himself from his parents’ values and customs. Due to his unwillingness to associate himself with the Indian cultural roots, he vigorously protests to the obligatory vacations spent in Calcutta. He perceives himself to be an ordinary man than all the other American boys. His name worsens his crisis of identity. According to Biswas the name Gogol “becomes a burden for him. It does not give him an identity but puts him in a dilemma about his original identity.”\textsuperscript{7} As an immigrant child Gogol has to fight constantly “with conflicts arising due to his Indian roots.”\textsuperscript{8} Having two names creates a sense of confusion and closely reflects his duality, his hyphenated status as an American-Indian.

In contrast to both Ashoke and Ashima, who are Indian by birth, Gogol is born in U.S. and as a its citizen, he feels a lot more confident about his position in his society than his parents did, therefore, in his childhood:
Ashoke and Ashima, eager to ensure that their son would imbibe and retain some essence of their Indian as well as Bengali background, would make a point of driving into Cambridge [...] when the Apu Trilogy plays at the Orson Welles, or when there is a Kathakali dance performance or a sitar recital at Memorial Hall [...] send him to Bengali language and culture lessons. (65)

But Gogol’s identity is torn between pride and mortification, between alienation and intimacy. The meaning of the name “Nikhil” implies “he who is entire, encompassing all” is in sharp contrast to his own identity at this present moment. In the process of shaping and reshaping, directing and redirecting, forging and re-forging himself as a social being, Gogol fails to sustain his selfhood during the process of his internal struggle. At another occasion, right after graduating from high school, Gogol finds himself in an awkward position at a party when he has to introduce himself to Kim: “But he does not want to tell Kim his name. He does not want to endure her reaction, to watch her [...] eyes grow wide. He wishes there were another name he could use, just this once, to get him through the evening” (95). In one extreme case, the Gangulis’ mailbox becomes the object of racist atrocity. “One morning, the day after Halloween, Gogol discovers, on his way to the bus stop, that it [GANGULI] has been shortened to GANG, with the word GREEN scrawled in pencil following it” (67). Obviously, the incident is painful to the America-born Gogol. The racist vandalism was the outcome of his parents’ difference from the Americans. His father suppresses his agony and dismisses Gogol’s concern by saying that it could only be a fun by some urchins. Apparently, Ashoke seems to have gone through many of these racist encounters and seems to have immunised himself from being affected any more.

Thus, name becomes an important source of alienation in the novel as it is clear from the very title. Apart from the protagonist’s constant wavering between his pet name (Gogol) and his good name (Nikhil), with interesting turns of hierarchy between the two as
he grows apart or comes closer to his family, there are other instances where naming is provided with a variety of significations. Ashima never utters her husband’s name (Ashoke), as this is not considered either proper or polite in the Bengali tradition. She is completely shocked when Maxine, Gogol’s American girlfriend, addresses her by her first name. At an earlier occasion when Ashima’s water bag bursts, she calls out to Ashoke. However, she does not take his name because this would not be proper. According to Ashima, “It’s not the type of thing Bengali wives do; a husband’s name is something intimate and therefore unspoken, cleverly patched over” (2). Bengali children are given two names: one that is a pet name, used only by family and close friends, and one that is used by the rest of society. In *The Namesake*, characters have good names, and pet names, used by families. When Lahiri is prompted to talk about this Bengali custom, she states:

I can’t speak for all Bengalis. But all the Bengalis I know personally, especially those living in India, have two names, one public, one private. It’s always fascinated me. My parents are called by different names depending on what country they happen to be in; in India they’re known by their pet names, but in America they’re known by their good names. My sister, who was born and raised in America, has two names. I’m like Gogol in that my pet name inadvertently became my good name. I have two other names on my passport and my birth certificate (my mother couldn’t settle on just one). But when I was enrolled in school the teachers decided that was the easiest of my names to pronounce and that was that. To this day many of my relatives think that it’s both odd and inappropriate that I’m known as in an official, public context.  

Names as pronounced by different people are associated with different things and their perception changes as characters grow. Upon entering kindergarten, Gogol is told by his family that he is to be called Nikhil, a good name, by teachers and the other children at
school. Later he remembers that this event could have changed his fate: “That one day, the first day at kindergarten [...] could have changed everything. He could have been Gogol only fifty percent of the time. Like his parents when they went to Calcutta, he would have had an alternative identity, a B-side to the self” (76). Gogol rejects his proper name and wants to be called Gogol by society as well as his family. This decision made on the first day of kindergarten causes him years of alienation as it was also his first attempt to reject a dual identity.

In Bengali families “individual names are sacred, inviolable. They are not meant to be inherited or shared” (28). However, Gogol spends his life living in the U.S. where children of immigrants are often ashamed of their differences from others. During adolescence, Gogol desires to live unnoticed. Other Americans alienate him and never regard him as an American, however, even though he is an American born citizen. At school, Gogol becomes painfully aware of the prevailing prejudices that generated his sense of alienation in the American society:

Gogol is bored by the panelists, who keep referring to something called “marginality” as if it were a medical condition [...] Gogol has never heard of the term ABCD. He eventually gathers that it stands for “American-born confused Desi.” He learns that the C could also stand for “conflicted.” He knows that desi, a generic word for a countryman, means Indian [...] But Gogol never thinks of India as desh. He thinks of it as Americans do, as India. (118)

Gogol himself, like other children of Indian expatriates sitting through these lessons “without interest, wishing they could be at ballet or softball practice instead” (66) like typically American children, hated attending them too. Gogol “inherits not only his parents’ culture or looks but also inherits the pain of being lost in an alien culture.” The resulting state of fragmentation causes confusion, conflicts and alienation in spite of his
endeavours to absorb into a foreign culture. Therefore, his old identity cannot gain the
stability he seeks. Gogol grows restless and ill at ease until his father Ashoke reveals the
origin of his name. Up to that point of revelation Gogol, by then renamed Nikhil tries to
establish his sense of home and homeliness.

Lahiri employs names as a means to symbolise a self-reflection process where the
individuals see themselves in the looking glass. She believes that people regard self as a
social object which they become aware of when they reach a particular age where a
process of affirmation of individuality occurs and they begin to grow to be autonomous.
This implies that the self is in a process of constructing a psychic identity. He shapes his
identity through the expectations of others which entails that he views himself as a
significant other. Gogol, initially, is not disturbed with his name and feels connected to it
and not alienated. However, he is unable to cope up with the turmoil originating due to the
tussle between his old and new identities. He is impatient and irritated by this transition,
which is symbolically represented with the shift from his “Gogol-identity” to the “Nikhil
identity.” The name Gogol causes uneasiness, up-rootedness, pain, anguish, and a strong
sense of alienation, “whereas Nikhil is the embodiment of all the cultural values that
America has given to Gogol.” Gogol in the classroom realises a perception of himself,
which he perceives is a reflection of himself that his classmates hold:

He looks at the table of contents, sees Gogol listed after Faulkner, before
Hemingway. The sight of it printed in capital letters on the crinkly page upsets him
viscerally. It’s as though the name were a particularly unflattering snapshot of
himself that makes him want to say in his defence, “That’s not really me”. Gogol
wants to excuse himself, to raise his hand and take a trip to the lavatory, but at the
same time he wants to draw as little attention to himself as possible. And so he sits,
avoiding eye contact with any of his classmates, and pages through the book.

(89)

In order to project a new identity, Gogol wants a name change to refashion his personality and redevelop his sense of self-esteem, hoping to defuse his pathetic sense of alienation. He approaches his parents who are saddened at this new step taken by their son but give their consent as he is bent upon changing his identity through his name. For Ashoke, the torment that his son feels is rather self-inflicted: “For his father had a point; the only person who did not take Gogol seriously, the only person who tormented him, the only person chronically aware of and afflicted by the embarrassment of his name, the only person who constantly questioned it and wished it were otherwise, was Gogol” (100). To justify the change of name he convinces the judge that his name is mysterious and he cannot associate with an identity which alienates him:

He wonders whether to tell the judge the whole convoluted story, about his grandmother’s letter that never made it to Cambridge, and about pet names and good names, about [...] his first day of kindergarten, but instead he takes a deep breath and tells [...] what he has never dared to admit to his parents. ‘I hate the name Gogol,’ he says. ‘I’ve always hated it. (101)

Towards the second-half of the novel Gogol, without inviting his parents, celebrates his twenty seventh birthday at his girlfriend Maxine’s lake house in New Hampshire. Maxine and her mother Lydia arrange a special dinner to celebrate his birthday. At dinner Gogol encounters Pamela, a middle-aged white woman who insists on his Indian origin, despite his polite response that he is from Boston. Although Gogol is an American citizen, he encounters the question often, “where do you come from?” Pamela comments that Gogol must never get sick when he travels to India. When Gogol denies it, she asserts, “but you’re an Indian [...] I’d think the climate wouldn’t affect you, given your heritage”
Maxine’s mother corrects Pamela, asserting that Gogol is American; but in the end even she hesitates asking him if he actually was born in the U.S. Even Gogol’s U.S. citizenship does not guarantee his identity as an American. Thus, he feels identity crisis to such a great extent that he is filled with frustration and an acute sense of alienation. It would be appropriate to say in Hegelian terminology of alienation that Gogol’s predicament and mental confusion make him a “self-alienated spirit” since he loses his control over his feelings.

No matter how honestly he tries to reveal his feelings, his parents fail to understand the emotive constituents in his behaviour due to which he feels alien to his “social substance”: “He hates that his name is both obscured that it has nothing to do with who he is, this is neither Indian nor American but of all things Russian. He hates having to live with it, with a pet name turned good name, day after day second after second” (76). Nikhil (the new name of Gogol) does not even exist for his parents and his relatives in India to whom the association with Gogol is impossible to remove. When he leaves for college, he rejects his identity as Gogol entirely and becomes Nikhil, his long abandoned original name that he had once rejected as a child. But that predicament also bears its challenges:

At times he feels as if he’s cast himself in a play, acting the part of twins, indistinguishable to the naked eye yet fundamentally different. At times he still feels his old name, painfully and without a warning [...]. He fears being discovered, having the whole charade somehow unravel, and in nightmares his files exposed, his original name printed on the front page of the Yale Daily News [...]. The substitution sounds wrong to Gogol, correct but off-key, the way it sounds when his parents speak English instead of Bengali. Stranger still is when one of his parents addresses him, in front of his new friends, as Nikhil directly. (105-106)
Gogol endeavours to fabricate a sense of home and homeliness, which he derives from his relationships to his beloveds and girlfriends. In an attempt to escape from his feelings of alienation, Gogol dives into several love affairs and intimate relationships rather than facing the challenges of his identity crisis. He befriends Ruth intimately but soon the relationship ends in fiasco. They split up and Gogol allows Ruth to pursue her goal as a scholar in French architecture. For the first time, through his sense of loneliness he gains an insight and the ability to empathise with his parents, who continually long for their loved ones in India: “He is lost without her [...] He feels wretched at the thought of the physical distance between them [...] He longs for her as his parents have longed, all these years, for the people they love in India—for the first time in his life, he knows this feeling” (117). In his initial encounter with a female fellow student called Kim, his experimentation with his new name commences: “I’m Nikhil,’ he says for the first time in his life. He says it tentatively, his voice sounding strained to his ears, the statement turning without his meaning it into a question. ‘Nikhil,’ she repeats. ‘I’ve never heard that before. It’s a lovely name’ (96).

Later Gogol meets Maxine whose luxurious and sensual lifestyle fascinates him. The possibility of being wholly integrated into her family’s life accounts for Nikhil’s heightened sense of wellbeing. During their first communal meal he is intrigued, fascinated and cannot desist the urge to relentlessly compare Maxine’s family to his own. The difference between the two is apparent: “The Ratliffs are vociferous at the table, opinionated about things his own parents are indifferent to: movies, exhibits at museums, good restaurants, the design of everyday things” (133). Categorically being accepted into the structures of their every-day lives fills him with feelings of affirmation and Nikhil escapes his former burdensome identity, his Gogol days of alienation. Gogol seeks refuge in the Ratliffs’ home and is distracted from the complications that his life holds in store for
him: “Quickly, simultaneously, he falls in love with Maxine, the house, and Gerald
Lydia’s manner of living, for to know her is to know and love all these things” (137). He
confesses to himself that now, living with his girlfriends’ parents, that he has broken the
shell of alienation and found freedom. He ruminates:

They live off sushi and salads and cold poached salmon. They switch from red
wine to white. Now that it is just the two of them it seems to him that, more than
ever, that they are living together. And yet for some reason it is dependence, not
adulthood, he feels. He feels free from expectation, of responsibility, in willing
exile from his own life. (142)

Once the young couple joins her parents at their house for the summer vacations, his
newly achieved freedom and distance from his own family invigorates him: “A bird begins
to call. And then he remembers that his parents cannot possibly reach him: he has not
given them the number and the Ratliffs are unlisted. That here at Maxine’s side, in this
cloistered wilderness, he is free” (158). Being away from home, partly living in a condo-
hotel in New York and the Ratliffs’ makes it easy for Gogol to live as Nikhil and absorb
American culture:

He did not want to attend his father’s alma mater, and live in an apartment in
Central Square as his parents once had, and revisit the streets about which his
parents speaks nostalgically. He didn’t want to go home on the weekends, to go
with them to pujos and Bengali parties, to remain unquestionably in their world.
He prefers New York, a place which his parents do not know well, whose beauty
they are blind to, which they fear. (126)

He manages quite happily to detach and alienates himself from his roots and his
family for years. When his mother Ashima calls him and enquires if he could do the
honour of visiting the family home before his father leaves to spend a semester at the
University of Ohio, he is reluctant to comply with her wishes: “Why do I have to see him off?” (144) Gogol asks his mother now. He knows that for his parents, the act of travel is never regarded casually, that even the most ordinary of journeys is seen off and greeted at either end. And yet he continues, “Baba and I already live in different states. I’m practically as far from Ohio as I am from Boston.” “That’s no way to think”, his mother says. “Please, Gogol. You haven’t been home since May” (144). Saloni Prasad while praising Lahiri opines rightly about Gogol’s separation from his parents and his cultural displacement:

Lahiri, as a second generation immigrant seems to have a delicate understanding and empathy of her characters. Gogol, moving away from his parents, in seeking a life separate from theirs might be interpreted as an exercise in cultural displacement […] She shows great skill in her exploration of human psyche, their inner turmoil and growth, the reaction of changes in culture and the powerful effect that our heritage can have on us.\(^{12}\)

Nikhil remains intimately close to Maxine and her family which functions as a welcome sanctuary. With Ashoke’s death Nikhil realises that he has been deluding himself. He is shaken by the overwhelming sense of loss with his father’s death and rekindles his identity as Gogol. He feels as a fish out of water and a permanent outsider in an alien land with strange people. The pathetic agony of Gogol is that he neither feels comfortable in family nor in his social environment. Though, he tries his best to detach himself from Indian roots, culture, heritage, values as his American friends do, yet he found no solace. Gogol remains Gogol at home and “what he does not know is that Ashoke’s attachment to the name runs deeper than literary affection.”\(^{13}\)
On this heart-breaking occasion, without resentment or shame, he assumes his responsibilities for his family. His bereavement combined with the demands of taking care of Sonia and his mother eventually leads to the break-up of his relationship with Maxine:

A year has passed since his father’s death. He still lives in New York [...] The only significant difference in his life, apart from the permanent absence of his father, is the additional absence of Maxine. At first, she’d been patient with him [...] Initially, she she’d tolerated his silences at the dinner table, his indifference in bed, his need to speak to his mother and Sonia every evening, and to visit them [...] without her. But she had not understood being excluded from the family’s plans to travel to Calcutta to scatter Ashoke’s ashes in the Ganges. (188)

Gogol finally marries the American-born Bengali woman Moushumi, whom he had met during his teenage years at their parents’ gatherings. Their first encounters as adults was arranged by both the families, the two of them reminisce about the past: “Well, it’s just funny to think that all our lives our parents raised us according to the illusion that we were cousins, that we were all part of some makeshift extended family” (204). After courting they fall in love with each other and pursue their lives together, which is met with warm approval from their families and thus, with given consent, they marry within a year. However, it’s not the type of wedding either of them really wants, but their marriage, despite the cultural heritage that they share, is not a bed of roses. Nikhil experiences jealousy towards Moushumi, because she once nearly married the American Graham, and does not feel entirely at ease with her close friends, Astrid and Donald. Her friends’ parties bore him and their intellectual ranting and raving wear him out to an extent, where he sometimes wonders, what he and Moushumi share and have in common. At one of those parties, Moushumi, half drunk, consciously reveals Nikhil’s name change, in spite of its private and sensitive nature:
He’d confessed to her that he still felt guilty for changing his name, more so now that his father was dead. And she’d assured him that it was understandable, that anyone in his place would have done the same. But now it’s become a joke to her. Suddenly, he regrets having ever told Moushumi; he wonders whether she’ll proclaim the story of his father’s accident to the table as well. (244)

Nonetheless, he loves her and his romantic notions about his wife culminate during their stay in Paris. Taking a photograph of her he thinks how he does not want to forget that moment when they were happily together. After coming back from their trip their lives are over-loaded with work and family obligations. Nikhil feels Moushumi’s growing distance, despondency and alienation. He reflects and searches for reasons to explain the changes in her behaviour patterns: “They did not argue, they still had sex, and yet he wondered. Did he still make her happy? She accused him of nothing, but more and more he sensed her distance, her dissatisfaction, her distraction” (271). No sooner than he becomes aware of his anxiety to lose his wife, does he learn that she had been having an extra marital affair with one of her former professors named Dimitri:

He felt the chill of her secrecy, numbing him, like a poison spreading quickly through his veins. He’d felt this way on only one other occasion, the night he had sat in the car with his father and learned the reason for his name. That night he’d experienced the same bewilderment, was sickened in the same way. But he felt none of the tenderness that he had felt for his father, only the anger, the humiliation of having been deceived. (282)

In the present society, strained relations between husband and wife create a chasm between them, which leads husband-wife to their sense of loss and loneliness. Gogol’s marital status is shattered and ends in fiasco. He, just like Gautama in Anita Desai’s Cry, the Peacock, feels alienated due to his strained marital relations. Gautama and his wife
Maya become aware of their loneliness and often whisper that they are alone. Gogol and Moushumi's relation also highlights the drift between husband and wife, frustration, sense of failure and keen awareness of futility in their existence. In fact, existence becomes meaningless to Gogol since he lives through an experience with which he is not able to reconcile. Therefore, Gogol feels uprooted, estranged from the partners and from the society itself. Thus, knowing his wife's love affair, it is for the first time in Gogol's life that another man's name upsets him more than his own. Gogol is completely shattered, like other second generation immigrants. Previously as an alienated being as in Jyoti Patil's words, "his unhappy relations with Ruth and Maxine left him utterly disappointed. He found himself rootless, and from sometimes he alienates himself from his family and from ABCD's, American Born Confused Desi, among whom he is still known by his pet name." As a divorcée, he continues to live and work in New York. Even the conservative Ashima, agrees to their divorce and is thankful for their more progressive and American approach: "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 of happiness. That pressure has given way, in the case of the subsequent generation, to American common sense" (276). Due to his failed marriage, his mental and emotional balance is shaken to the core. He feels a sense of failure:

In so many ways, his family's life feels like a string of accidents, unforeseen, unintended, one accident begetting another. It has started with his father's train wreck, paralyzing him at first, later inspiring him to move as far as possible, to make a new life on the other side of the world. There was the disappearance of the name Gogol's [...] defining and distressing him for so many years. He tried to
correct that randomness, that error. And yet it had not been possible to reinvent himself fully, to break from that mismatched name. (286-287)

It is only much later in his life that Gogol begins to appreciate the value of his Bengali heritage and he comes to terms with the significance of his name. His internal conflict with his identity could not be resolved until he is informed by Ashoke about the true nature of the meaning behind his unusual first name: “And suddenly the sound of his pet name, uttered by his father as he has been accustomed to hearing all his life [...] “Is that what you think of when you think of me?” Gogol asks him. “Do I remind you of that night?” “Not at all”, his father says eventually “You remind me of everything that followed” (124).

This newly gained insight is instrumental in the development of Gogol as he realises that the answer is not to abandon or attempt to diminish either culture, but to mix with the two together. Gogol is not fully in tune with his identity and feels alienated until he realises that it is embellished by both the rich cultures. He does not have to be one or the other nor does he has to choose. He is a product of Eastern as well as Western society and instead of feeling ashamed, he should accept the presence of these influences on his life:

Years later Gogol had learned the significance, that it was a Bengali son’s duty to shave his head in the wake of a parent’s death [...] Now, sitting together at the kitchen table at six-thirty every evening, the hour feeling more like midnight through the window, his father’s chair empty, this meatless meal is the only thing that seems to make sense. (179-180)

Though the novel wraps up with Gogol’s acute sense of alienation and his lonely identity rejected by the native people of U.S. yet he becomes able to withstand and retain his serenity. He is no longer ashamed of himself or his background. Most importantly, he
is proud of his name and all that it means, being now able to connect to “the man who gave you his name, from the man who gave you your name” (288).

Looking back at his life Gogol now succeeds in comprehending what had escaped him in his approach to life all these years. Gogol Ganguli rekindles an affirmation for life and a pattern of recognition. The depression, which had made him disorganised and confused, disperses and he is bestowed with new insight. He prefers rationality to emotions and nothingness now seems intelligible to him. Returning to the long rejected book metaphorically implies his homecoming and his assertion of “emotional balance.” The gloss is now completed and the environment is congenial to the further expansion of his knowledge and love for the intimates of his world.

Gogol’s interest in Nikolai Gogol’s short-story therefore functions as a therapeutic metaphor for it provides release to the unacceptable perspective of Gogol. His eagerness to devour the stories in the book is an indication of what he aims for with his new approach to life. He is enthusiastically busy re-establishing his emotional balance rather than a sheer surrender before alienation with his old identity, bestowed to him by his parents during his childhood. “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). The situation is condensed with a moving emotive experience and the erasing of the tension he had long borne. At last, Gogol Nikhil Ganguli, as his father had foreseen, having travelled great distances both physically and mentally, embarked on a journey which ultimately lead him to contentment: “Try to remember it always, he said [...] Remember that you and I made this journey, that we went together to a place where there was nowhere left to go” (187).
Gogol discovers that identity is not only made of names, citizenships and similar administrative data recorded in passports. It is also made of something else, which is unique, a kind of third component that escapes such dichotomies and which have to be located in a kind of a culture which is neither that of the motherland, nor that of the other land. Salvation in literature (which Moushumi also finds) is a solution to identity crisis that is not new in postcolonial and exilic literatures. Lahiri goes a bit further than that in creating a narrative whose individual dimension does not just have the function of bearing witness to paradigmatic group experiences, but is valued, above all categories designed to contain it, in its own right. Gogol wonders how his parents had done it, leaving their respective families behind, they have reached an alien land. The realisation of his inadequacy, the inability to be sustained by memories of a ‘homeland’, to go on struggling to survive abroad, are skills that Gogol seeks because he feels that in the absence of a little India in the form of his home containing Ashima, he will not feel at home in the country where he was born. He understands the nature of the bond that compelled his parents to make annual pilgrimages to the motherland.

Roots, origin, family bonds inspire the expatriates, immigrants, non-resident Indians to return again and again to the point from where they move away. This emotional and spiritual bond gives form to Lahiri’s novel and short stories and about such a state of expatriate existence, the following words of Aamer Hussin seem to be the most appropriate:

It implies neither a forced eviction from one’s motherland nor a deliberate rejection; there are no connotations of permanent or obligatory leave taking. There is, instead, a tremendous inherent privilege in the term, a mobility of mind if not always of matter, to which we as writers should lay claim: a doubling instead of a split.15
Lahiri, as a fictional creator, occupies this privileged space in between two countries, two continents, two cultures, and this multiplicity of perspectives, a truly multi-national existence and a multi-cultural experience makes her one of the foremost spokespersons of the multitude of minute yet consequential incidents that constitute contemporary life. The fear of committing errors does not end here, and memory only aggravates the pain.
The space of the foreigner is a moving train, a plane in flight, the very transition that precludes stopping.

- Julia Kristeva

Lahiri's works are impressive exploration of human mind and life. She has made the tales of human idiosyncrasies thought-provoking and soul searching. She is a true artist in a sense that as an author she plays an interpreter. By interpreting life, she provides a chance to the readers to comprehend life as she has perceived. Being either ambassador or refugee in a foreign ambience both writers and ordinary people represent the India which is unseen by native Indian. Her recent collection of short-stories Unaccustomed Earth (2008) depicts displaced immigrant protagonists of second-generation Indian American characters searching for a way to fit into a community while still maintaining individuality. Living in foreign communities these characters often feel alienated from the places in which they should be able to feel at home. Unaccustomed Earth is rich with Lahiri's signature gifts: exquisite prose, emotional wisdom, and subtle renderings of the most intricate workings of the heart and mind. It is a masterful, dazzling work of a writer at the peak of her powers.

This displacement often leads to an inability to make connections on an intimate level. Nevertheless, Lahiri's characters often struggle against their deep sense of alienation and isolation as they yearn to nurture and rekindle connection with other communities. Lahiri's characters, many of whom were born and raised in the U.S., were brought up in the Indian tradition and live their lives according to the parameters of that tradition. The pushing and pulling between cultures results in much tension in the protagonists' lives as they attempt to mediate between old-world demands of tradition and new-world demands of contemporary living and relationship. Lahiri calls this the shuttling between two dimensions that have nothing to do with each another. Her characters grasp at the most
elusive of connections just to feel as though they have some kind of relationship. These relationships, however superficial, do serve a purpose for the protagonists.

Lahiri’s second collection of eight short-stories, *Unaccustomed Earth*, like her novel *The Namesake* deals with the theme of being trapped between two cultures. Alienation and identity crisis in a physical sense are the common themes in the stories, because in each story a character or family is caught between cultures and often between generations. It is from the perspective of the American-born children of immigrants who must navigate between the traditional values of their parents and the modern American values of their peers. The first five stories in this book stand on their own, while the last three are grouped together as “Hema and Kaushik.” These three stories explore the intertwined histories of the title characters, a girl and boy from two Bengali immigrant families, at three different points in their lives. Like Edwidge Danticat (a Haitian-American author) in *The Dew Breaker*, Lahiri includes a series of interconnected stories in this volume.

In the title story of the collection named “Unaccustomed Earth”, the 38-year-old Ruma is physically dislocated and culturally displaced character. A Bengali-American and a former lawyer, Ruma is a stay-at-home-mom, expecting the birth of her second child, at the outset of her narrative. As she raises her son, Akash, a toddler throughout the story (unlike Gogol who grows to adulthood in *The Namesake*), she pays host to her widower father. The visit occupies the central space in the narrative. The father’s stay uncovers Ruma’s personal problems leading to an identity crisis and a sense of alienation. The reader gradually discovers that her cultural background plays a very crucial role in her life. In the story cultural identification proves to be a problematic concept for second-generation migrants. Ruma finds herself in a strange dilemma since she has inherited a sense of exile and loss from her parents. The mental trauma and a constant sense of
alienation changed her life. As a growing child Ruma feels estranged from her father due
to the unfair treatment given to her in comparison to her younger sister Romi, who enjoys
a carefree life. Ruma grows aware of the dullness and meaninglessness of her existence in
such a family environment. Her sense of alienation is more heightened with frequent
parental discords. The father-daughter relationship in the story is quite complicated; Ruma
has always been closer to her mother, a traditional Bengali woman, strictly adhering to all
habits and customs even after moving to the U.S. Though, Ruma is born on American soil,
but she carries an emotional baggage of tradition with her. In spite of her mother’s efforts
Ruma turns into a sort of American child. Her sense of rootlessness in a hostile family
environment keeps on increasing all the time. It culminates into a kind of schizophrenia.
Despite her parents’ disapproval she marries her American boyfriend Adam and feels a
sense of liberation. She curbed her own desires in order to gain her mother’s approval, but
it seemed to Ruma that she was unable to satisfy her mother’s wishes no matter how hard
she tried:

Ten Years ago her mother had done everything in her power to talk Ruma out of
marrying Adam, saying that he would divorce her, that in the end he would marry
an American girl. Neither of these things had happened, but she sometimes thought
back of that time, remembering how bold she’d had to be in order to withstand her
mother’s outrage, and her father’s refusal to express even that, which had felt more
cruel. “You are ashamed of yourself, of being Indian, that is the bottom line,” her
mother had told her again and again.17

After having found her own family and a beloved son Akash, Ruma was able to
make the first significant move towards establishing independence. It was a sheer bold
step on the part of Ruma to neutralise her alienated feelings. It marks a sense of
individualism where she is less marked by her parents’ influence. The process of freeing
herself from the clutches of alienation is not immediate but a prolonged process, a journey, which she is well underway. Similar to her character Ruma, the author was faced with the same conflict of either conforming to her parents or to muster up the strength and courage to confront them and engage in assimilating the American lifestyle. Talking to Vibhuti Patel in New York City, Lahiri admits:

It was always a question of allegiance, of choice. I wanted to please my parents and meet their expectations. I also wanted to meet the expectations of my American peers and the expectations I put on myself to fit into American society. It’s a classic case of divided identity but depending on the degree to which the immigrants in question are willing to assimilate, the conflict is more or less pronounced. My parents were fearful and suspicious of America and American culture when I was growing up. Maintaining ties with 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. Now that I’m an adult I understand and sympathize more with my parents’ predicament. But when I was a child it was harder for me to understand their views. At times I felt that their expectations for 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. On the other hand, when I was growing up, India was largely a mystery to Americans as well, not nearly as present in the fabric of American culture as it is today […] I felt that I led two very separate lives.¹⁸

After the sudden death of her mother, the distance between Ruma and her father seems to grow even wider. While her mother’s death shocked Ruma and left her totally
unprepared for life without her, her father appears to be lightened by it. After selling the family house, a cruel act of "wiping out her mother's presence" (6) in Ruma's eyes, he started travelling all around Europe, enjoying the freedom of a widower. The impersonal postcards Ruma receives from him from time to time remind her of her father's openness to the possibilities of the wide world that starkly contrasted with his reserved behaviour towards his own daughter. The fragmented and incomplete sentences referring to his schedule and travel updates aptly exemplify the shattered father-daughter bond.

During the week-long visit of the father, Ruma and her father scrutinise each other yet neither of them is willing to talk openly about their relationship and future plans. Ruma's father, who remains nameless till the end of the story, gradually realises how much his daughter resembles his deceased wife as the difference between mother and daughter gradually blur and disappear. "Like his wife, Ruma was now alone in this new place, overwhelmed, without friends, caring for a young child, all of it reminding him, too much, of the early years of his marriage, the years for which his wife had never forgiven him. He had always assumed Ruma's life would be different" (40). Exhausted by motherly duties and her second pregnancy, Ruma shuts herself in the monotonous world of domestic chores. The part-time job in a law firm in New York is a matter of the past; in Seattle, Ruma has transformed into a housewife, eschewing all ambitions and possibilities concerning her self-realisation. "Growing up, her mother's example – moving to a foreign place for the sake of marriage, caring exclusively for children and household – had served as a warning, a path to avoid. Yet this was Ruma's life now" (11).

Ruma's social isolation and her preference for solitude, which inevitably leads to her alienation, are contrasted immensely with her father's socialising and travelling adventures. At the age of seventy, Ruma's "well rested" (12) father has discovered the world of pleasurable pastimes and noncommittal acquaintances. Enjoying his newly
acquired freedom and nonchalant lifestyle, he is able to disengage himself from everyday obligations. At the same time, however, he is painfully aware of his daughter’s worries and unhappiness. His week-long visit to Seattle finally succeeds in invigorating the long lost closeness, although without its verbal acknowledgment. Some matters still remain unspoken, but the initial barrier seems to be overcome in the final act of reconciliation.

Ruma’s father loves his grandson Akash. However, he wants to stick to his secret love affair which seems to be the rarest of the rare passion to him. He prefers his lady love to his grandson who would, as he imagines, outgrow this attachment after he attains maturity. So Ruma’s father keeps an eye on future as well as on the present. There is no doubt that Ruma’s father is sensitive to his daughter’s feelings but firm in his convictions and manages to take charge of the proceedings. Having found the letter that is addressed to his girlfriend, Ruma is forced to accept her father’s new ways:

Her first impulse was to shred it, but she stopped herself, staring at the Bengali letters her mother had once tried and failed to teach Ruma when she was a girl.

They were sentences her mother would have absorbed in an instant, sentences that proved, with more force that the funeral [...] that her mother no longer existed. Where had her mother gone, when life persisted, when Ruma still needed her to explain so many things? (59)

At the end, Ruma decides to send the postcard in her father’s name to facilitate his future life and potential happiness. She mourns her mother’s absence and at the same time realises that she should stop interfering with her father’s life. Thus, the story discusses the problem of complicated intergenerational relationships viewed from the migrant’s perspective. Belonging to the second generation of immigrants, Ruma (like her brother Romi) displays typical signs of assimilation and gradual alienation from Bengali customs, a change noticed by her father as his children grew up. “The more the children grew, the
less they seemed to resemble either parent – they spoke differently, dressed differently, seemed foreign in every way, from the texture of their hair to the shapes of their feet and hands” (54). Shedding many “habits of her upbringing [...] in her adult life” (14), Ruma’s view about her parents’ culture and its significance for her own life undergoes some crucial changes. Despite Ruma’s drifting away from her Bengali roots, she is painfully aware of a certain loss. Her three-year old son Akash, “a perfect synthesis of Ruma and Adam” (10) speaks only English, hates Indian food and has no memory of her mother. The fragile connection to her parents’ past, and to Akash’s roots as well, is slowly disintegrating. Not even Adam, her successful American husband, is able to provide the necessary consolation. Even though he supports Ruma in all her decisions and appears to be almost an ideal husband, Ruma has the feeling that “she and Adam were separate people leading separate lives” (26).

The story entitled “Hell-Heaven” portrays Usha and her Bengali migrated family. Like other stories of Lahiri, it examines the effect of cultural displacement on the characters. Lahiri is interested in exploring the idea of alienation in the modern Western society and the way that characters already experiencing a kind of alienation arising from within their own culture react to the new kind of alienation which they encounter in a culturally and geographically unfamiliar environment. The story is about the Bhadralok (a caste in Bengali culture) who migrated to America in 1970s and the cross currents and undercurrents between two cultures. The tale of alienation is about Pranab Chakraborty, the protagonist and the story is told by Usha – the daughter of the family. Usha and her mother met Pranab Chakraborty in the early seventies who came to U.S. from Calcutta to study engineering at MIT. Pranab is new in America and feels lonely in Boston. He finds himself in an alien land and amidst alien culture. In Boston, his sense of homelessness gets heightened when he finds no friends. At this juncture, he meets the Bhadraloks and they
take him with them, feeding him daily. Later Usha’s mother falls in love with Pranab. Previously Usha’s mother and father were married according to the Bengali tradition. But her father does not love her mother because he married only to please his parents. Usha’s mother, therefore, felt alienated and was attracted towards Pranab. Usha’s mother asserts that actually her husband “was wedded to his work, his research and he existed in a shell that neither my mother nor I could penetrate” (65). Pranab became depended on her mother and calls her *Boudi* (Auntie) in affection. They usually play and talk to each other candidly, sometimes “confronting each other in a way she and my father never did” (65). However, Usha said, “I did not know back then, that Pranab Kaku’s visits were what my mother looked forward to all day that she changed into a new Sari” (63).

In the course of the story, Pranab meets an American woman named Deborah and falls in love with her. Although his own parents “were horrified by the thought of their only son marrying an American woman” (71), Usha’s mother feels betrayed and alienated. Soon, Pranab gets married to Deborah and walks out on Usha’s mother. Usha’s mother predicts that Pranab and Deborah will divorce on cultural grounds, as it is hard to change one’s cultural mindset. Deborah and Pranab were different in terms of customs, values, and attitudes and moreover their social upbringing was quite dissimilar. Thus, their relation becomes itself a crisis and Boudi’s prediction takes its shape. “And in the end, my mother was right, and fourteen years after that Thanksgiving, after twenty-three years of marriage, Pranab Kaku and Deborah got divorced” (81). However, in the end of the story Usha’s mother confesses to Usha that she attempted suicide a few weeks after Pranab’s wedding. Usha was then only a child and could not understand that her mother was suffering so badly on account of Pranab. On the other side, Usha grows in the cross cultural environment: First she has crushes, then dates, then she has foolish love affairs that lead to sleeping with different men including Matty who also betrayed and alienated
her like others, and finally a heartbreak, as the story of Pranab comes to an end. By this
time Usha is reaching thirty – her middle age, and sooner may run into menopause; her
mother reaches fifty. By now her mother has accepted the American ways of Usha and
consoles her daughter that she would find a true lover.

Thus, Lahiri’s characters enter a world of ‘social isolation’ and become
disconnected from their roots and family, culture and homeland. The sense of alienation
and identity crisis are recurring motifs in her works. Lahiri, as an immigrant author, has
effectively carved her characters and brings out their alienation and identity formation.
She too has the xenophobia of the Western world and writes like other immigrant authors.
In M.G. Hedge words:

Whether it is an idealisation of the homeland or a negative image of it, they indeed
appear to counterbalance the cultural-shock they experience in the alien nation
where they have immigrated. A wide variety of responses can be seen in their
stories – from total rejection to total acceptance – consequent to their attempts to
form a new life in the midst of a conflict between cultures.19

Alienation and loneliness are a heavy burden and one of the most unrecognised
aspects of their lives. In the midst of this separation, the agony and emptiness of these
characters give rise to deviant behaviour in drugs, sex, gambling and alcohol and
ultimately which leads to various psychological and physical problems such as alienation.
In fact, Lahiri has taken the dominant motifs of twentieth-century American literature and
explained the malaise of modern American society. Her characters are often unusually
lonely, isolated people. Her authorial voice taking on an omniscient or patronising tone as
it often does with other well known writers of South Asian descent. Lahiri’s writing skills
achieve more edge by her attention to descriptions of the cultural mélange that is the South
Asian experience, whether in India or abroad. There is no specific moral to the story, no
prescription attached to the revelations made. Furthermore, there is no gesture made to explain or justify the figures through the symbolic prism of culture.

“A Choice of Accommodation” proves that alienation is a fundamental element of human existence as Kaufman opines that “Alienation is neither a disease nor a blessing, but better or worse, a central feature of human existence.” The story deals with the issues of identity crisis, estrangement and a perpetual sense of alienation and their impact on families and on individuals. Amit, the main character of the story seems totally affected from alienation and isolation. Amit is the Managing Editor of a medical journal who lives in America along with his wife Megan and two daughters Maya and Monika. He and his wife Megan come to Langford Academy, from which Amit graduated eighteen years ago. They are there for Pam’s (Amit’s old friend) wedding, which is to take place at the school. Amit feels lonely and alien without the company of his daughters but “sensed Megan’s relief at not having Maya and Monika around, at being free” (89). Pam’s father is the Headmaster of the school. Pam and Amit went to the same university. Previously Amit had a brief love affair with Pam. Megan guesses the same and is jealous of Pam. Amit conceals his sentiments for Pam from his wife and like an alienated person, who has failed to shape his love relation into reality, tries his best to exhume the past:

He had no nostalgia for the school and when letters came seeking alumni contributions or inviting him to the succession of reunions, he threw them out without opening them. Apart from his loose connection with Pam, a sweatshirt he still owned with the school’s wrinkled name across the chest, there was nothing to remind him of those years of his life. (86)

Amit and Megan are getting ready for Pam’s wedding at the hotel when Megan notices that there is a hole in her dress. The husband and wife promise that they will spend all night without leaving each other’s side in order to hide the hole.
hole in Megan’s dress as a metaphor for imperfection of their relationship. Amit says to woman next to him at dinner, “Actually it was after the second child that our marriage sort of disappeared” (114). However, he gets impatient with Megan’s expression at the party, which he cannot usually see. Here, one notices that Amit really loves Megan, but can not understand her true feelings. He fails to understand that their married life is still in its premature phase and therefore it still lacks stability. The wedding starts and Amit lost in his nostalgia remembering his high school days as a student. Amit remembered the time when his parents decided that they would go back to India for his father’s work, at that time he was only fifteen years old. Amit was reluctant to live alone in an alien land but his father, who was a doctor by profession, decided to join a hospital in Delhi. Lahiri observes that the new geography and elasticity of the modern world works only for one category of citizens who, like Ashima in *The Namesake* and Amit’s parents, can afford eventually to go back to their home country.

Amit had been stunned by his parents’ decision. His parents like most other Bengalis in Massachusetts, had always been dismissive, even critical, of India, never homesick or sentimental [...] The relative affluence of America never impressed them; in many ways they have lived more privileged lives in India, but they left the country and had not looked back. (95-96)

Amit was never comfortable in America but unfortunately he was left alone there by his parents. After some time, Amit moved to Langford where he felt estranged and alienated because he “was the only Indian student, and people always assumed that he’d been born and raised in that country and not in Massachusetts” (97). He did not like his new school life and felt lonely like a new born bird out of its nest whose parents have left it. Amit feels thoroughly helpless and powerless to change his destiny. Thus, loss of a homely place and native culture aroused alienated feelings in the young boy. In
Martin Heidegger’s terminology, “Alienation grows from the human experience from a broken home; it is rooted in a sense of not feeling at home or unheimlichkeit.” In fact, Amit feels like a stranger in America and becomes problematic to himself, though it is common phenomena of a migrant life, as observes Abraham Sagi:

The loss or of the distancing to one’s native culture can cause grief in a migrant life. The psychological adjustments necessary to adopt and integrate into a new culture call into question the notion of a pure identity. Moreover the hybrid status of a migrant may pose a threat to one’s identity by questioning the relationship between self and the place.

Lahiri exemplifies that the place to which one feels the strongest attachment is not necessarily the country one was tied to by blood or birth: it is the place that allows one to become oneself. This place, she indicates, may not lie on the purview of any map. Amit has a feeling of guilt about taking Megan to unfamiliar people but she seems to enjoy talking to strange people. Amit thinks that she is miles away from him though they promise not to leave each other’s side which reminded him the same “resentment that often seized him after he cleaned up the kitchen and bathed Maya and Monika and put them to bed, and then watched television alone” (114). Amit gradually starts resenting her superiority and gets drunk. Leaving Megan, he goes to look for a phone to call up his children. He cannot find a phone and goes back to the hotel. He is drunk more than he thinks and sleeps till next morning. When he wakes up in the morning, Megan is very angry. “He eyed the empty chair next to Megan, knowing he wasn’t welcome. She had not turned around to face him, had not looked up, and he stood partly behind her, shivering, his arms crossed in front of him” (119). Amit feels sorry for his behaviour and explained how under the influence of alcohol he abandoned her. Megan does not “acknowledge his apology” (120), but says that she was worried about him and looked for him everywhere
last night. Amit soothes her and they go for brunch at the school but the party has already ended. Megan asks him about Pam when they go to dormitory room. Amit lives in the dormitory at Langford. He has never said to Megan that he was in love with Pam, but she has sensed it long ago. He finally confesses his old feelings for Pam and “kneeled on the floor and put his arms around her legs, pressing his face against her jeans” (125) and finally they make love. Thus, ultimately he tried to overthrow his sense of alienation by a significant attempt to confess his guilt and surrender his self before his wife and as a result in the end they accept each other.

Sudha and Rahul’s parents, in the story “Only Goodness”, migrate from India to London. While uprooting themselves to start a new life, the characters are faced with questions of identity, issues of guilt, schism, alienation resulting from hostility and the confounding intricacies of relationships:

[...] Sudha supposed it was a combination of his being a boy and being younger, and her parents being more at ease with the way the things worked in America by then. Sudha had no fondness of her younger self, no sentimental affection […] Even as an adult, she wished only that she could go back and change things: the ungainly things she’d worn, the insecurity she’d felt, all the innocent mistakes she’d made. (137)

Throughout the story this sense of alienation, whether quiet or overt, spoken or unspoken, continues to cross state lines and continents, intermixing with the soil without regard for boundaries, collective histories or individual intentions or their best efforts. Only Neel, too young to be aware of the fissures swelling beneath the surface, is able to imagine pure “goodness.” This story focuses on the toll alcoholism takes on a family. When Rahul Mukherjee visited his sister Sudha at college, she introduced him to alcohol, giving him his first beer. Later, when he was in college and she was visiting, he asked her
to buy beer and vodka for him. As they moved through their lives the drinking takes its toll. Rahul first did poorly at Cornell, and then dropped out. He ends up unemployed and living back at home with their parents. Meanwhile, Sudha flourishes, finishing school and going on to Masters’ degrees. She goes to the London School of Economics, where she meets Roger, the man she marries. After a while, Rahul contacts her, claiming he is in rehabilitation and not drinking. He visits her in London and gets along well with the family, including Sudha’s ten-month-old son Neel. On his last evening there, Rahul volunteers to baby sit Neel so Sudha and Roger can have a night out. When they return, they find Neel in the bath, and Rahul passed out. Roger was furious because Sudha had never told him that Rahul was an alcoholic.

In “Nobody’s Business”, Lahiri observes how born and raised in the U.S., children of immigrants often face difficult choices between endorsing their family’s country of origin (native culture) and mainstream U.S. society (host culture). They live mostly in a state of deviance and experience alienation, tension and mental trauma with their new cultures. Their sense of alienation involves normlessness and social isolation because these immigrants feel that they cannot accomplish their goals and are being excluded from the host culture. Although second generation immigrants desire to fit into the host society, their parents often demand that they adhere to norms and traditions of the natal culture. Sometimes, even host culture respond in a way to strengthen their alienation e.g. refusing to interact with immigrants, being obscene, ridiculing etc. As a result, these immigrants are likely to withdraw from host culture or become hostile towards it. The story “Nobody’s Business” is of about a beautiful college dropout, Sang (Sangeeta), 30 years old, who receive telephone calls from Indian suitors who have acquired her number from the vast Cambridge Bengali network. Her parents want her to be married. Sang after finding a suitable housemate advertisement lives with Paul and Heather in shabby rented
rooms occupied by three housemates and their sometime lovers. The lodgers form a kind of false family, separated and alienated from one another because of conflicting sets of assumptions and conventions. They know the intimate details of one another’s lives because of their shared physical spaces, but the connection among them is no more affectionate or committed than that between casual social acquaintances. They usually treat one another with a kind of informal sociability, as if they were friends. However, since the relationships are all temporary and involve no recognised commitment, they can also pretend that they are total strangers to one another. Either set of conventions can apply, as the doors open and shut, controlled not by any social force, but by the most forceful personality.

The protagonist, Paul, a graduate student, shares a kitchen, a living room, and a telephone with two young women, Heather, a minor character, and Sang, a pretty, intelligent, poised young Bengali-American woman to whom he is attracted. In the beginning of the story, Paul is alone and isolated, feeling a sense of alienation. His parents have passed away and he has no friends. His love relation ended a few years ago for reasons even he does not fully understand. Paul is a student of Ph.D. (in English literature), but unfortunately he had failed the previous year, not because he was unprepared, but because he was so nervous that his mind went blank. He seems numb, both mentally and emotionally, and yet he is vulnerable because of confusion. He seems an embodiment of unusable potential, full of ideas and knowledge that he cannot articulate and a capacity for caring that has no object. His abilities to think and to love are locked away in closed rooms.

He is socially isolated and alienated because he has so little personal life to keep private; he seeks semi-private places, studying in the living room, the kitchen or later the library. But even his room is a semi-public space into which other people’s voices enter,
into which other people (Sang, for instance) can enter. Thus, Paul is deliberately seeking isolation but could not find solace. His life, essentially, is semi-public, providing neither privacy nor emotional intimacy, just like his room. Nevertheless, he has the habits of a lonely, alienated but restrained person, seeking the presence of others but usually careful not to impose himself. He seeks connection to Sang, trying to impress her with his knowledge of literature, in which she has hardly any interest and picking up the thread of conversations of a few hours past. Sang seems to be quite the opposite of Paul. She is besieged by calls from potential suitors, recommended by her parents and the Bengali grapevine. However, she refuses to see them because she has a boyfriend, an Egyptian professor named Farouk, whom she plans to marry. He has never directly asked her to marry him but he makes vague references to a future together. They have been having an affair for three years and he does not contradict her when she mentions their future marriage. Sometimes Paul overhears her talking on the phone to him and they seem to be fighting. Another time, walking by her room, he overhears her shouting and hears Farouk commanding her to lower her voice so that her housemates cannot hear. Sang’s space extends outward from her room as her intimate problems radiate outward from her personal turmoil. Her music, her voice on the phone and her quarrels with Farouk – all reach beyond her rented space. However, she maintains the same friendliness with her housemates as if everything is normal in her life and Paul pretends that he has surmised nothing. It is not, after all, his business.

However, Paul is lonely, alienated and curious, and there is no one to observe or criticise what he wants to do. When the other housemates are gone, he physically expands into the rest of the house, leaving his belongings in the common areas and later entering Sang’s room while she is away in London visiting her sister. A package has come for her, and at first, when he leans the package against her door and it opens, he closes it firmly.
Then he changes his mind and, most oddly, knocks on the door even though he knows she is in London. He senses that he should stay within his boundaries but he cannot resist the temptation. He lies down on her bed and undid his belt buckle and considers imaginary sex with Sang, “But suddenly the desire left him, absent from his body just as she was absent from the room” (193). On some level, he knows that imaginary sex would be a violation. Paul, perhaps, seeks genuine intimacy but his world is high and dry and emotional intimacy can happen only in his imagination. He is so alienated that his small space cannot accommodate the real presence of another person. After he falls asleep in her bed, he is awakened by a phone call from a drunken woman asking for Sang. Her name is Deirdre. Paul obediently takes down her name and phone number and tries to forget about it. But she calls repeatedly and asks Paul questions about himself and about Sang. Who is Sang? Is it true that she is Farouk’s cousin? He answers cautiously, politely, not wanting to be directly rude. But he does tell her that Sang is not Farouk’s cousin, but his fiancée. At this, the woman begins crying and tells Paul that she is Farouk’s lover, tells him how they met, what his habits are, and the course of their love affair. She claims, in fact, that Farouk has just made love to her on the staircase of her house. He hears a dog, which Deirdre has told him Farouk hates, barking in the background. Paul is not sure whether to believe her or not. Perhaps she is some former girlfriend of Farouk’s wanting to make trouble. Thus, he decides irresolutely to mention only that a woman called and asked for her.

These two juxtaposed scenes are significant on several grounds of studying alienation. First, Paul intrudes on Sang’s physical space, which he senses as a violation but does anyway, and then Sang’s inner emotional life intrudes into his life. He has opened a door into her life and cannot find a way of closing it. Moreover, as soon as he becomes involved in her life through Deirdre’s call, he finds he has no right way of acting. As an
acquaintance, he should not know what he knows and yet he does. The polite response, as an acquaintance, seems to be to pretend not to know. Perhaps a friend should tell her the complete truth, and yet he is not her friend, as she has made clear, and perhaps not even a friend can reveal this kind of unwanted knowledge. And finally, there is the image of the staircase on which Deirdre claims Farouk made love to her, a mirror image of the staircase in the house in which Sang and Paul live. The image is so vivid that Paul can imagine Farouk and Deirdre having sex on their stairs every time and Paul feels a strong sense of alienation while watching them.

When Sang returns, she is mildly puzzled by this call from an unknown woman but decides to ignore it. However, Deirdre calls back, talks to Sang and questions her about Farouk without saying anything about her own relationship with him. This leads Sang to ask Paul about the first call the lady has made, and after some reluctance, he tells her the complete story. At this point, Sang enters his space, not as the lover as imagined but as an intruder who will both misinterpret his behaviour and exploit his feelings. Sitting across from Sang while they are discussing Deirdre’s call, he had imagined very differently, “He regretted that Sang and not another person had moved into the room, into his house, into his life” (90). In this scene, Sang criticises Paul for not telling her all he knew about Deirdre. She blames that he is involved in a relationship with no clear boundaries, no clear loyalties and rules which causes to mount Paul’s sense of alienation. Later, Sang talks to Farouk and receives his false version of events, which she prefers to believe despite its improbability because it enables her to continue to believe that her relationship with Farouk is exclusive, or that it at least shuts out people like Deirdre. Armed with her false belief, she goes into Paul’s room and angrily accuses him of making up the whole story about Deirdre’s crying in order to break up her relationship with Farouk and to try to get her for himself. The day before, he was supposed to act like a loyal friend and tell her all
that he knows, and now she is not ready to believe what Paul has told her. Paul feels her presence as a violation: "For her sake, he’d told her about the crying. That night in the kitchen, watching her make the salad, he’d felt the walls collapsing around her. He’d wanted to warn her somehow. Now he wanted to push her from the door frame where she stood" (90-91).

The architectural metaphors are deliberately chosen here. A “house” is not a place of safety but a place where walls can collapse, a place where the self collapses, as Sang’s does. The house is another false promise, like the staircase that promises connection and leads to alienation and loneliness. Stung by Sang’s false accusations, the usually passive Paul takes action and revolts against it. He buys an extension to connect to the same phone, asks Sang to listen while he calls and talks to Deirdre (who is unaware that Sang is listening), and makes her recognise the truth of the matter. To some degree, at least, he is vindicated, but, more importantly, he seems to have gained a degree of self-confidence. Sang wants Paul to take her to Farouk’s to which he agrees. Farouk inhabits a deliberately impersonal space, “an ugly high rise, bereft of charm yet clearly exclusive” (93), like Farouk’s inner self. From this ugly but exclusive place, Sang has been regularly vacated (he won’t let her sleep over, instead, sending her home in a taxi after they have had sex) and is about to be thrown out again. Farouk will not have his physical space slept in or his psychic space disturbed; in this, as well as in his complex relationship with Sang, he is a mirror image of Paul.

When Sang knocks at the door, Farouk hesitates at first even to let her in, and then, conceding to her, he turns on Paul, telling him to leave and trying to push him out of the doorway. In the ensuing scuffle, Paul pulls Farouk down to the floor: “For a moment, Paul lay on top of him fully, subduing him like a lover [...] He looked at the man beneath, a man he barely knew, a man he hated [...] All she wants is for you to admit it,” Paul said. “I
think you owe her that” (93). At this point, Farouk spits at Paul. Paul recoils and Sang and Farouk goes into the apartment while Paul waits outside. He can hear shouting and weeping, and so do the neighbours, who call the police. Sang has thrown a hysterical scene, breaking a vase, clawing at her own face until she is covered with scratches and finally hiding in a closet. Eventually Paul takes depressed Sang back to her apartment while she is clinging to his hand the whole way.

The scene contains a series of violations and manipulations, in which what is true to the outside world is in direct contrast to the complex emotional truth lived by the people involved. Paul is violated and alienated by being spat upon after he has won the wrestling match, thus making his supposed victory inconsequential. He is also obliged to admit the fact that he is “no one” to Sang when neighbours misconstrue his statement that he “lives with the woman inside” (94) to mean that he is her husband and he has to clarify their relationship. Farouk’s ugly, exclusive physical space has been violated and alienated, both by Sang and by the police. But Sang is obliged to admit that she is officially “no one” to Farouk, just as Paul is “no one” to her. When the police ask her if she lives there, she can only stammer, “I painted the walls” (93). Farouk himself seems to remain intact, perhaps because he can retreat further into himself than Paul or Sang can touch, perhaps because there is no self to be touched. Sang, who has been emotionally violated by being lied to and exploited, is priced out of the closet in which she has taken refuge, as she has in the relationship. Neither is a refuge but is another person’s space into which she was once invited but is now unwelcome. Officially, however, Sang, the person trespassed against, is the trespasser. The next morning, Paul hears the taxi door slam as she leaves, and he finds a note thanking him for last night and a cheque for her share of the month’s rent. He never sees or talks to her again. When the next month’s rent is due and he calls her in London, she refuses to speak to him but sends a friend over to take away her belongings so her
room can be rented to someone else. She and Paul, too, are now living by exterior rules that say they were never more than fellow lodgers and that she owes him nothing but money. There is in this a great pain of unrecognised connection and alienation that affects Paul, Sang, and Farouk too. Lahiri sharply points at American society which provides no rituals of thanks and closure for temporary intimates and inner emotional truths remain unacknowledged.

A few weeks later, Paul passes his Ph.D. Viva Voce, and his committee takes him out for drinks at an expensive hotel. Walking home back, he sees Farouk and a fashionably dressed but rather worn-looking woman sitting on a park bench. He sits across from them and stares at them, thinking that Farouk cannot say anything to him with this new woman with him. It does not occur to him that the woman is Deirdre, because she has told Paul that she lives in an old farmhouse out in the countryside, apparently lying about the details of the affair as a way of distancing herself from her own self-disclosure. But Farouk speaks to him, telling that Paul is lucky that he is not going to sue him for injuring him during their fight. Then he and the woman walk away. Paul realises that she is no one else but Deirdre. The relationships of the story are two overlapping triangles. Paul lives with two women but he is not emotionally or physically intimate with either of them. Farouk is sexually intimate with two women but lives with neither of them. Neither Paul nor Farouk have any friends. Paul hates Farouk, his alter ego, his shadow; yet grappling with him brings no enlightenment or closure as it would in a more conventional story. Thus, the story “Nobody’s Business” is highly suggestive in terms of the meaning of alienation. In the story, there are no rules, no norms, no mutually acknowledged set of expectations of how people should act, which makes it all the more difficult that they must live within the same physical structures. The story is two versions of the American spirit of place, one utopian, one dystopian. None of the characters in the story has any emotional connection
with each other. They live surrounded by the landmarks of the American literary renaissance. They are all from somewhere else, living in a land not their own which is of course a double blow for them. Deirdre and Farouk go swimming in Walden Pond, and, for them, it is no more than the place of their first date, with no resonance of the brilliant and eccentrically self-isolated spirit that once inhabited it. For them, it is the scenery of a foreign place, the backdrop for their love affair. Likewise, when Paul wants to relax before his exams, he visits Emerson’s house, but it has no connection to his intellectual life. He is studying English literature, the literature of another place, unrelated to where he is, and he seems not to love even that, but to simply view it as a body of knowledge to be mastered. Although Sang is American-born, she seems at home in London as she is in Boston, if not more so, since her sister is in London. America is just another of the temporary spaces she inhabits. None of these characters are part of any American community, either by their own wish, like Farouk, or by circumstances, like Paul. They are not even part of an imagined community. Thus, such messages of cultural non-acceptance produce a deep sense of alienation that reaches into every level of the immigrant’s life. There is a very little scope for these people to overcome their sense of alienation, “[...] as for Existentialist Philosophy, alienation ceases to be a process or an outcome of it and becomes a primary situation which cannot be overcome.”

In contrast to Gogol Nikhil Ganguli, Lahiri’s other Bengali character Kaushik Choudhuri, whose life one follows from the age of nine until his late thirties in the narrative trilogy of “Once in a Lifetime”, “Year’s End” and “Going Ashore”, is less successful with his efforts to establish a sense of autonomy. In “Once in a Lifetime”, Hema recollects her childhood in Massachussetts when she meets Kaushik, the son of her parent’s close friends. The second story titled “Year’s End” picks up the thread of narration years later from Kaushik’s point of view as he deals with his father’s second
marriage after the untimely death of Kaushik’s mother. In the final story titled “Coming Ashore”, Lahiri examines the theme of alienation through cultural conflict between America and India as it reflects on the characters’ decisions.

Kaushik is a photographer by profession and has experienced loss and alienation due to war. He is also specialised in photography and journalism related to war. He acts as a bystander, a documenter of his own life and of the world around him rather than as a participant. Whereas, Gogol in The Namesake escapes his problems of identity by indulging into romantic relationships, Kaushik’s longing for a similar escape is brought to the fore by his willingness to hide himself behind a camera lens:

That was the first thing he’d loved about taking pictures—it had gotten him out of the house. His earliest memories, of Cambridge, Massachusetts, where he’d been born, were all outdoors [...] He was reminded of his family’s moves each time he visited another refugee camp, every time he watched a family combing through rubble for their possessions. In the end, that was life: a few plates, a favourite comb, a pair of slippers, a child’s string of beads. He wanted to believe that he was different, that in ten minutes he could be on his way to anywhere in the world. But he knew that it was impossible, wherever he landed, not to form attachments [...] And he knew, that in his own way, with his camera, he was dependant on the material world, stealing from it, hoarding it, unwilling to let it go. The move to Asia was official now. (309)

It seems as if the trials and tribulations of his life are only bearable when filtered through this media apparatus. Kaushik’s sense of alienation and homelessness is amplified by the involuntary moves, twice back and forth, between India and Cambridge, Massachusetts. His father usually remarked that even in Bombay they managed to raise a typical American teenager. Instability at home and lack of belongingness enhances his
dilemma. He stopped searching a home and decides to live the life of a traveller: “You live in India?” “I do not” live anywhere at the moment. I’m about to move to Hong Kong.” “Married?” Henrik asked. He shook his head” (328). Hema and Kaushik spend a few weeks of passion together in Rome where she comments that they did not speak of their own future, of where their days together would lead. Nor did they discuss the past. Kaushik’s narrative is intriguing in terms of alienation regarding the possibilities pursued by second-generation male immigrants to come to terms with their hybrid, transient sense of identity. Identity formation is an open, dialectical and dynamic process of constant renegotiation. The two characters Hema and Kaushik negotiate and come to terms with their identities with entirely different approaches. One overcomes alienation and comfort through his efforts and negotiations with himself and his surroundings, becoming an architect and thus a creator of tangible spatial stability, while the other dwells in unconfined openness, alienated identity escaping from society and ultimately vanish into deep waters, forever traceless caught up in turbulent waves: “By then I needed no proof of your absence from the world […] It might have been your child but this was not the case. We had been careful, and you had left nothing behind” (333).

Like Yemi D. Ogunyemi (a Nigerian writer), who wrote that household roles both subjugated and empowered women, Lahiri manifests a curious way of attributing power to the woman in her stories. By portraying her female characters in traditional roles – such as nearly silent, often jobless housewives and mothers, Lahiri displays the inner monologue and alienation of her female characters. These women use their constant re-evaluation of cross-cultural – Indian-American mores, often developed by implementing maternity to improve their lives and the lives of those around them.

Indeed, the most potent narrative with regard to alienation in the trilogy is the tragic narrative of maternal loss. Hema catches a glimpse of the horror that fills Kaushik’s
lens everyday: “There were countless images, terrible things, things she'd read about in
the newspaper and never had to think about again. Buses blasted apart by bombs, bodies
on stretchers, young boys throwing stones” (315). One can only conclude that devoid of
motherly love young boys take to wrong paths. Kaushik too follows a wrong path due to
the untimely death of his mother. The void created by her mother’s death could not be
filled by his father. After her death and his father’s remarriage, Kaushik, funded by his
father, takes off to the East Coast of the U.S., exploring deathlike scenes reminding him of
his mother and her death. His father has two daughters from this new marriage – Rupa and
Piu. Kaushik quickly develops a special bond with his two step sisters. With the passage
of time, Kaushik “[…] felt separate from them in every way but at the same time could not
deny the things that bound them together” (272). Kaushik observes that a need for defined
connection is constantly resurfacing despite the bonding, he and his stepsisters share and
have built. “We were all waiting for my father, waiting for him to return and explain, if
only by his presence, why we were sitting together drinking tea” (277).

Kaushik’s father, referred to in the story as Dr. Choudhuri, loves his new wife,
named Chitra, passionately. Her hospitality aids Kaushik and his father’s working through
their grief and new life scenario: “Chitra cleared all the plates and took them into the
kitchen, just as she had the night before, allowing my father and me to relax after dinner in
a way that we’d never been able to during the last years of my mother’s life” (280). In fact
Chitra also happy with this marriage and performs her household duties nicely. But the
loss of mother cannot be filled directly by a substitute mother. Chitra is Kaushik’s step
mother and thus both fail to devolve any intimacy and attachment for each other.

Kaushik is scared by his father’s newfound love for Chitra, and decides to look
after his two step-sisters, “I sensed that they needed me to guard them, as I needed them,
from the growing, incontrovertible fact that Chitra and my father now formed a couple”
The bonding between the siblings allows them to overcome their respective loneliness. But, Kaushik’s tale of woes does not end here. Once, he discovers his sisters examining a box of his deceased mother’s pictures, and as a result Kaushik is filled with anger and shakes the girls violently:

What the hell do you think you’re doing? I said now. Rupa looked at me, her dark eyes flashing, and Piu began to cry [...] I grabbed Rupa by the shoulders from where she sat crouched on the floor, shaking her forcefully. Her Body had gone limp, her thin legs wobbling in their cabled black tights [...] You have no right to be looking at these, I told them. They do not belong to you, do you understand?

Later in the story, Hema and Kaushik meet by chance in Italy after a gap of two long decades. Hema, now a college Professor, is tormented about her previous love affair with a married man and plans to settle down by marrying someone else. Here, after all, Hema and Kaushik truly know one another. Hema is the only person Kaushik knows who knew his mother, who truly understands his life. Throughout their affair, Kaushik and Hema both admit that their connection is partly due to Hema’s familiarity with Kaushik’s late mother. When Kaushik and his family moved to the U.S., Hema and Kaushik were in their teens, they stay with Hema’s family and Hema is the first to learn that Kaushik’s mother is dying of breast cancer. This revelation comes directly following Hema’s receiving her first bra, fitted for her in a department store fitting room while she stood beside Kaushik’s mother, whose bare, cancerous breasts she unabashedly flaunted before Hema. Yet, Hema is unabashed when she recalls the incident. At this passionate moment Hema recalls Kaushik’s mother, complimenting her (Hema’s) beauty long ago:

Hema remembered that it was Kaushik’s mother who had first paid her that compliment, in the fitting room shopping for bras, and she told this to Kaushik. It
was the first mention, between them, of his mother, and yet it did not cause them to
grow awkward. If anything it bound them closer together, and Hema knew, without
having to be told, that she was the first person he’d ever slept with who’d known
his mother, who was able to remember her as he did. (313)

The above mentioned lines show that Hema’s mention of Kaushik’s mother (Parul)
only connects the two young lovers during sex. Hema and Kaushik seem mutually drawn
to each other and to their shared memories of Kaushik’s late mother. But Hema is
unfamiliar with many aspects of Kaushik’s daily life like the extensive travel, the horrific
photos and his sense of alienation due to his mother’s death etc. She cannot make a
permanent connection to Kaushik, despite her love for him. Thus, she is completely turned
off by his impulsiveness, marries according to a prearranged engagement, and becomes
pregnant, living not unhappily (but still thinking of Kaushik) until she hears of his death:

I returned to my existence, the existence I had chosen instead of you [...] Those
cold, dark days I spent in bed, unable to speak, burning with new life, but
mourning your death, went unquestioned by Navin, who had already begun to take
a quiet pride in my condition. My mother, who called often from India to check on
me, had heard, too. ‘Remember the Choudhuris, the family that once stayed with
us?’ she began. It might have been your child, but this was not the case. We had
been careful, and you had left nothing behind. (333)

Given the images Kaushik captures in his lens, one can only encapsulate that Lahiri
predicts this ruffled feelings of alienation on a global scale. Hema’s meaninglessness in
life, alienation, and the disconnection that she feels from her husband implies a
perpetuation of pain and disillusionment. The death of Kaushik’s mother begins his
journey towards his own destruction. Parul’s death foreshadows Kaushik’s own death and
its impact on Hema, who is devastated by his passing. It also implies Lahiri’s
foreshadowing of a destruction or loss of Bengali-Americans’ cultural and emotional bond and this loss and alienation affect all the male or female characters. However, Lahiri’s narrative and Hema’s memory presents a lasting testament to overcome this perennial sense of alienation. It also implies that Hema’s and Kaushik’s tale of loss is not entirely complete. Because Hema’s memory remains, it is possible to view Lahiri’s narrative with a slight glimmer of hope for getting cultural roots and emotional bonds in general.

Thus, Lahiri’s *The Namesake* and *Unaccustomed Earth*, provide a great sense of alienation, disaffection, hostility, isolation and separation that lie in the images, metaphors, characters, interconnecting patterns, and emblematic moments. The functions of race as a marker of identity in both the selective works are indicative of the way in which Lahiri brings attention to the effects of alienation and race on South Asian American identity. Although Lahiri does not explicitly confront race in her works, the realities of racialisation in the U.S. are embedded in Lahiri’s narratives just as they are embedded in American history, and the experiences of her characters demonstrate the inefficiency of race as a determining factor of identity. Rushdie’s idea of “travelling with walls” illustrates how migrants leave a place behind yet physically and mentally holds on to it. They tend to cling onto traditions with the mystical notion of the homeland which grows to be a burden. In Loren C. Eiseley words:

> It was obvious I was attached by a thread to a thing that had ever been there, or certainly not for long. Something that had to be held in the air, or sustained in the mind, because it was part of my orientation in the universe and I could not survive without it. There was more than an animal’s attachment to a place. There was something else, the attachment of the spirit to a grouping of events in time; it was part of our mortality.\(^{24}\)
Notes and References


7 Bhatt 40.

8 Bhatt 40.


10 Patel

11 Bhatt 41.


18 Patel


21 Sagi 8.
