Chapter Six
Conclusion: Images of Bengal and Bengalis

"Standing neither behind a closed door, nor in the thick of things but rather in the shadow of a doorway is a good place from which to observe."¹ In post-colonial discourse a noticeable tendency among writers and theorists is to regard dislocation and distance as enabling conditions. True, "Distance does provide a view," but then, as Rushdie opines, "too much distance can remove one from knowing the place altogether. It's about striking the right balance between the imagined, invented memory and the real thing."² How much this balance is maintained in Bengali diasporic narratives in English – where home is expressed as much by a mental geography as through the representation of a physical landscape – has been a consistent search throughout my thesis.

Instead of walking along the much-trodden trajectory of a so-called unified Indian or South Asian diasporic literature, the present research singles out as its subject specifically Bengali diasporic literary responses.³ The creative outpourings of Bengalis presently residing in different western sites demarcate a fairly extensive fictional terrain that highlights both the general traits it shares with the rest of the subcontinental literary diaspora as well as its peculiarly Bengali qualities. In fact, many of the works of this diaspora attempt to chronicle Bengali immigrants’ relationships to their homeland as well as their responses to immigration and assimilation. The present thesis explores such images of Bengal and Bengalis, both at home and abroad, reflected in the fictional narratives of the Bengali diasporic authors.

Every research is bound by definition to be a post-script or a sequel at most. While mine could not be an exception, I have concentrated on a research topic which to the best of my knowledge has gone unexplored before. The selection of authors is made keeping in mind the idea of a balanced and comprehensive representation in terms of gender, region and religion as well as the setting and subject of writing. In conducting the research I have adopted methods of textual analysis/exegesis of my primary sources, while taking into account socio-cultural issues

² Rushdie is quoted as saying so in Hazra, Indrajit. "I'm Really Keen on Exploring India." Interview with Rushdie. Hindustan Times 12 Apr. 2008: 12
³ In fact, Khan's protagonist in Seasonal Adjustments categorically protests the practice of the homogenisation of people from the subcontinent into a monolithic category called "Indian" as it refuses to recognise cultural specificities and differences.
and existing research pertinent to my area of interest. Other than their fictional narratives I have also concentrated on interviews, personal essays and non-fictional works of my research authors as well as the works of other Bengali diasporic and resident writers as part of the continuum within which to locate my study.

**Overview: First Chapter**

People of Bengali origin are now widely spread across the world; especially the 1960s and 70s witnessed a massive surge of Bengali dispersion to foreign lands, which is still continuing. In the introductory chapter there is a mapping of Bengali diaspora and diasporic writers as well as a brief discussion of the Bengali mind, Bengali cultural and social aspects with reference to some scholars on the subject. This study is also well informed by contemporary discourses on related issues such as the concept of home and homeland, the phenomenon of migration and diasporic anxieties, the complex and ever-evolving dynamics inherent in the articulation of racial, cultural, national or ethnic identities, and the politics of representation of those themes and subjects in fictional and critical prose. In the opening chapter, it is discussed that the uncertainties with which a writer who has left his homeland speaks about it can hardly be the same as those of one located securely within it; that the act of leaving home and settling elsewhere shapes both the writer's sensibility and the text in a unique way; that he gains first hand knowledge of immigrant experience, but loses touch with home reality. Therefore, when he intends to write about the homeland, questions arise; his perennial outsider status, his alienation locates him in a special fluid space wherein memory can intervene to create unreal and often distorted images, and thus his comment on the economic, social and political scenario back home may appear very often exaggerating or under-rating. To counter the much repeated accusation of lacking authenticity and legitimacy of representation, the diasporic writers insist on their freedom of writing whatever they choose. After all, the unique vision of an individual artist and the unique representation he or she provides of a community are often challenged by readers from both within and outside the community, but every representation has its own value.4

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Overview: Second Chapter

The second chapter focuses on Monica Ali, who draws blunt disapproval from a section of the Bengali community in Britain which she claims to represent in Brick Lane, a novel named after a narrow, half a mile long, innocuous lane in East London, known for its distinct character of being a mini-Bengal right in the heart of London – where the Bengali diasporic population, predominantly Bangladeshi Muslims, lives. The novel does not offer a very flattering representation of the Bangladeshi Muslim community in general and this is what the protesters resented; particularly those who went there from Sylhet district of Bangladesh resisted the stereotyping of most diasporic Bangladeshis as uneducated Sylhetis. Ali has been criticised for her supposed lack of cultural literacy, skin-deep understanding of the dynamics of relationships within Bengali Muslim families and demeaning representation of eastern scholarship. For many, Brick Lane is full of slander and cynicism about this ethnic minority, a novel from one more outsider, presenting cynical anthropologies to an audience that is not Bengali.

Inter-generational conflicts in the diaspora and a mild caricature of the older generation and its sentimental clinging to the image of Golden Bengal are core issues in Brick Lane. “Going Home Syndrome,” the diasporic urge to return to the roots, is also a much-explored theme of the book. “Home” is presented as an intriguing, even elusive concept: often it is a lonely escape to an alternative reality from a defeated present, sometimes a bundle of betraying memories and longings, sometimes a wholly imagined idyllic hub and very rarely, a practically existing, cartographic space ready for return. Home for Chanu symbolises many things – an uncorrupted sanctuary for his daughters, a proud and autonomous Bengali history and culture defying colonial dictates and, above all, a site that would grant him his due dignity and position, free from humiliation in London. On the other hand, through a long and cautious journey, England has become Nazneen’s adopted home; for her, returning to the present Bangladesh is to risk yet another dislocation. Nazneen’s daughters are much less confused – home for them is England. Bengal is a cultural baggage of their parents, which they are unwilling to share. For them, Bangladesh defines nightmares to be eternally avoided. It is the impossible place where girls get married off in no time, where one brushes with a neem twig and has to do without toilet paper. Karim is another second-generation immigrant who finds his identity, dignity and even home in the global Muslim ummah, though he wears jeans, stammers in Bengali and is almost a prototype of the Bengali youth who aggressively try to adopt British customs.
There are abundant references in the novel to Bengali culture and history, ranging from the painter Jainul Abedin to the pre-colonial state of Bengali weaving industry to the syncretic religious tradition/s of Bengal through Chanu’s reflections, and there are also vignettes from the “real” context back home through Hasina’s letters. Ali also touches upon factors underlying the radicalisation of Bengali Muslim youth, i.e. the neo-colonialist injustice in the Muslim world at present and also the British colonialist presence and attendant injustices in the Indian subcontinent in the past, but her narrativisation is problematised by the fact that these are voiced by Karim and Chanu respectively – two persons who cannot be taken seriously. Their satirical treatment in the book renders them unreliable as reference points.

Hasina’s letters, written from Dhaka, the only real contact with the actual geographical “home” in Brick Lane, present an ironic dystopic antithesis to Chanu’s dreams. Her letters go a long way to dispel the idea that Bangladesh is still rural and paradisal. It is urban, violent, grossly iniquitous and locked into the global capitalist system. Patriarchy rules strong there; the women are in a dismal state; suffering is routine, especially for the poor among them. This native version of patriarchy is seen to proliferate in diaspora as well. Thus, the status of women and position of patriarchy in the diasporic Bangladeshi community as well as at home is another central concern of the book. The community, according to Brick Lane, is not kind to women who have somehow transgressed the pre-scripted, nostalgic role of the ideal obedient Bengali Muslim wife. I tend to think, however, that the portrait of Bangladeshi women, both at home and abroad, in Brick Lane is too bleak to be true.

The novel also throws light on the attitudes and evils that characterise the next generation in Brick Lane. Those who are born and bred there constitute approximately half of the Bengali immigrant community which festers with budding gangsters and drug-addicts, alcoholics or religious radicals; the girls however are relatively better assimilated in the London society and are doing well in studies. Another related contentious issue of the novel is the retentiveness versus assimilationist debate where opinion is divided even within the same gender and generation. While Chanu is all for retention of a pure culture, identity and heritage, Razia ecstatically proclaims the beauty of England in its hybridity and opportunities.

Women of both generations are found to be more willing to carve out their identity in British-Bangladeshi terms. Indeed, the novel could be looked at as a collective bildungsroman of
many of the expatriate Bangladeshi women who tinker with their limited personal spaces in order to achieve a certain degree of self-empowerment. From a cultivated invisibility and resigned fatalism to economic autonomy and self-assertion is a long journey for Nazneen. She finally chooses to stay back in London with her two daughters, while Chanu undertakes the long-awaited journey back home. Monica Ali seems to discard the memory-drenched golden image of home back in Bangladesh and is partial towards London as the site of self-discovery, particularly for women. Ali’s men dream of returning but not the women, and also not the second generation immigrants who fail to appreciate the adherence to ethnic cultural mores by their parents and opt for acculturation as the mode of integration into their immediate society.

Nazneen’s extramarital affair sets her off on the route to assimilation – her coming to terms with the dominant culture; the culmination, however, lies not in the outcome of the affair, for Nazneen carves for herself a third space without either husband or lover, in the comforting company of her daughters and an exclusively female-run garment enterprise. Her ice-skating at the end is a metaphor for her liberation as well as self-articulation where she finally rejects the white racism that makes her (in)visible as well as a pre-scripted socio-religious identity into which both her husband and her lover shove her.

It is significant that there are many from the second-generation immigrants who foreground their global Islamic identity rather than the local Bengali one. Already distant from home and initially a soft target for the white racists, religious identity has helped them in self-assertion and in restoring their dignity and courage to resist attacks. But, if anarchy and its obverse, i.e. fundamentalist Puritanism, are one streak among the second-generation males in Brick Lane, then there are others who are comfortable with hybridity and even celebrate it, e.g. the young man who suggests that “Bengal Tigers” would be a good name for his band.

While in Karim’s convinced analysis the 9/11 was a white conspiracy in order to victimise Muslims, Nazneen could only think that no one benefited from it, questioning thereby all such imagined divisions guarded with fanatic zeal. The other character who is outraged by such religious radicalism is Chanu, the first-generation immigrant who remembers home and its syncretic, typically Bengali, religious traditions. The differences between Karim and Chanu in their attitude to religion and Islam are not just the gap between first and second-generation immigrants or that between pining for the home in Bangladesh and imagining one in the global
ummah; the two approaches in fact comprise “two conflicting claims towards defining the identity of the community.”

As I said before – in my chapter on Ali – without the anthropological value which one automatically associates with minority representations in the West, the authenticity question would not have been so recurrent or important. At ease with her liminal position in either the Bangladeshi or British community, Monica Ali defends her right to write about homeland, to speak of any subaltern of her choice. But maybe her dystopic vision of both native and diasporic Bangladeshis could have been hybridised with some optimism, and her almost utopic rendering of the turn of events towards the end of the novel, when Nazneen finally recognises her identity as a British Bengali, a little more tempered.

Finally, how real is the dystopic reality of Bangladesh presented in Brick Lane? Being a second generation immigrant herself, Monica Ali seems biased more to the viewpoint of second generation immigrants; she seems to be espousing the need to assimilate, acculturate and discourage exclusivist adherence to the native tradition. This is evident in the way characters apprehensive of hybridity/assimilation – “traditionalists” – are finally ridiculed, or vilified.

**Overview: Third Chapter**

In the third chapter, devoted to Sunetra Gupta, I have shown that Bengaliness in Gupta’s fiction is not a carefully constructed identity that finds reassurance in difference with others but rather a function of her poetic self that is formed out of diverse, often contradictory influences deriving from place, history and culture. **Memories of Rain** is discussed as an elegy for Bengali culture and for the genre of romance. Apparently it is about a middle-class Bengali romantic dream come true – a young sensitive girl is married to and carried off across the seven seas by the white prince of her dreams; finally however, it turns out to be a rather anti-romantic sequel to the last line of this fairy-tale – “And they lived happily ever after.” **Medea** and **Na Hanyate** are

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discussed as the two major co-texts of this novel, inspiring image-clusters vital to the life and ethos of the middle-class Kolkatan Bengali in Gupta’s novel.

Memories of Rain shows the dependence of Bengali culture on the towering figure of the poet Rabindranath Tagore; the protagonist idolises Tagore and even deifies him. Tagore’s songs provided a magnificent and exaggerated metaphor for her adolescent pain, romanticism and sexuality; even decades later, she adapts Tagore’s songs to her indefinable anguish and sorrow in cold England. The novel itself is replete with Gupta’s poetic translations of Tagore-songs to articulate the central emotions of her text. In her autobiographical essay on Calcutta from which I have quoted extensively, Gupta talks about her own reliance on Tagore and her discovery that Tagore’s rain-songs are in dissonance with “the sad dripping English sky.” Gupta regrets the fact that urban Bengalis have chosen to ignore his urgent visions regarding politics and education and thereby reduced the poet’s dreams to its dregs, clutching on obsessively to over-stylised versions of his romantic songs and poems.

If Tagore’s songs are one constant through Memories of Rain, the other is a haunting evocation of Calcutta from multiple perspectives, exploring its diverse dimensions – whether it be a glimpse into its cosmopolitan past and present or its nostalgic image as a tired mother betrayed and abused by her own child. Calcutta has been represented from Anthony’s superior gaze as well as from Moni’s angle which blends her nostalgic imaginings with apparently unbiased vintage footages of the city and its chequered history and geography. Moni’s reminiscences create a collage of memories of Calcutta as well as the life and ethos of middle-class Calcuttan Bengalis of the 1970s – struck by both Tagore and communism. The text is replete with love for literature, music, theatre as well as another cultural trademark – the Bengali intellectualism and vibrant adda-culture which was almost metonymic of the urban Bengali youth way back in the 1970s. Indeed, the age-old Coffee House near Presidency College was iconic as the host of such adda sessions – where topics covered the entire gamut from literature, music, theatre, culture, society and taboos to radical politics. Apart from some stray references to Young Bengal in the early days of the nineteenth century Bengal Renaissance, or the British East India Company, Moni’s perspective is largely indifferent to the (macro-)history of this colonial city; her mapping of Calcutta is more through micro-histories etched in her personal memory, e.g. the flood of 1978 when she had first met Anthony, the regular powercuts then, the expectant
alleys and cheap Chinese restaurants of Calcutta during their first courtship or the grim and suppressed oral history of Anwar Shah Road brimming with buried skulls of murdered young revolutionaries/Naxals way back in the 1960s. Her sense of the geography of the city too, is not that of a professional flâneur; rather it is that of an insider – limited yet personal. It only stretches to the neighbouring terrains of her home and college, to the Academy of Fine Arts, Ballygunge, Max Mueller Bhavan, Rashbehari Avenue, Dhakuria Bridge and Lower Circular Road, i.e. cultural centres dotting central and south Calcutta.

Memories of Rain is possibly Gupta’s only novel in which she deigns to furnish intricate anthropological footnotes to translate her city to a Western audience. Untranslated Bengali words are thus sparse in Memories of Rain while translated cultural details abound: Moni’s staple diet is the traditional Bengali steaming fish curry; there are exhaustive details about Durga Puja and Kali Puja, about the idols, myths and rituals central to both occasions and the festivity tensed with frantic shoppers. The exotic institution of arranged marriage is not left out, nor are some rituals of the elaborate Hindu wedding. There are vignettes of westernised families who spoke a queer mixture of English and Bengali at home representing the highly anglicised elite of Calcutta. Again, the marginalized existence of the Anglo-Indian community makes Moni aware of the cosmopolitan roots of Calcutta many of its citizens have chosen to forget.

Gupta’s representation of Calcutta in the 1970s is minutely detailed and authentic, but how inclusive is this depiction? Without some exceptions, her Calcuttans are safely middle-class and intellectually oriented. Not being grinded by poverty that is the fate of so many inhabitants of this city, they can afford the comfort of intellectualism. There is hardly any reference to the struggling Bangladeshi refugees who had come in hordes to this city during those years or to the millions of part-time or wholesale immigrants from rural Bengal or other states who depended on Calcutta for their survival. Except Moni’s memory of occasional visits to an aunt who was teaching in a remote school in rural Bengal – a two-hour cycle rickshaw ride from an obscure train station – the huge hinterland that supplied all kinds of resources to Calcutta is also conspicuously absent. Gupta’s Bengal, then, is practically synonymous with educated, middle-class Calcutta of the 1970s, brushing shoulders with and yet blissfully oblivious of the teeming millions of destitutes who populated the cityscape.
Once upon a time in Calcutta, when Moni was an adolescent, television was a rare luxury in a house and a source of warm neighbourhood bonding. Today despite the apparent technological coming of age, there are telltale signs of decay of the city and its culture. For this colonial capital, elegance and grace seem to have become concepts rehabilitated only in memory. And this is as much true of the dumped filth and architectural anarchy of Calcutta as of its decadent citizens. Studies of this decadence - of both city and citizens - are there in A Sin of Colour and The Glassblower's Breath as well. However, if Calcutta appears to have slipped into decadence to Gupta and many of her characters only “now,” i.e. in the nineties, the city had never exceeded its primary images of poverty, misery and decay to most of its foreign visitors in her fiction like Anthony for whom even Moni’s romanticised, Tagore-tinged rains finally contributed to exposing socio-economic divisions in the city.

Gupta’s protagonist shares an ambiguous and complex emotional relation with Calcutta, “the city, whose tired blistered nipples she had pushed aside with disdainful lips” (112), a relation that throbs with anguished love and guilt. In her memory, Calcutta comes across as poor and overburdened but not without kindness and love. Unlike Calcutta, London turns out to be cold, depressing and hostile, an apt silhouette to her marital angst. Moni could not belong to London. For her, home is Calcutta that she had abandoned for Anthony, an irretrievable home frozen in time and space that can now be visited only in memory: her brother makes clear the stake by suggesting on the eve of her marriage that there could be “no back to Bengal” (178) for her. It is to this home now that she plans to return, not - unlike Durga - on an annual visit as a daughter well loved by her husband, but rather as a daughter spurned and rejected. She knows that back home, she would miss the “creature comforts” which were promised in this land of privilege and her daughter might never see or taste such unadulterated food. Yet, the city has nurtured her and she cannot escape its amniotic allure despite many inadequacies. Moni now wants to compensate partly by identifying herself with the spirit of Calcutta which embraces and accommodates all by tending the poor, hungry and abandoned of the city, thereby overcoming her fear of the filth of poverty.

Sunetra Gupta does not equate the diaspora with the victim mode; she also rejects the victim mode implicit in almost every brand of feminism: if Esha and Niharika have suffered, so have Promothesh and Debendranath. Her approach is broadly humanist, transcending a focussed, gendered approach; even in Memories of Rain, whilst Moni’s spirited return home to Calcutta
with her mixed race daughter suggests a form of resolution and agency, she seems less concerned with gender politics or social issues suggested by the female protagonist’s physical displacement or her husband’s cruelty, than with the imaginative sustenance provided by the reworking of her memories interwoven with legendary and mythical stories of her cosmopolitan Bengali past.

Memory, a highly subjective and elastic category blending fantasy with the past, has been a vital player in Gupta’s novels, constantly intervening in the linear flow of the plot. I have focussed elaborately on her prose style – the stream of consciousness technique, textual experiments regarding punctuation and sentence-construction; and have argued that her reluctance to use full stops has to do with her Bengali sensibility and that her English reads almost like a translation of stylised, even poetic Bengali, reflecting perhaps an unconscious but distinct Bengali mode of narrativisation in English.

Overview: Fourth Chapter

The fourth chapter studies all of Lahiri’s fiction that reverberates with the feel of Bengali life and ethos and brings to fore many of the issues Bengalis face at home and abroad. Her narratives are tailored to illustrate her Bengali protagonists’ long and sustained struggles to adapt themselves into foreign lands, their attempts to come to terms with memories of their former lives as they negotiate demands of the present. It is significant that, apart from the male perspective, Lahiri writes several stories from the women’s point of view and also draws on children in a number of her stories to unravel the new generation’s vision.

Her stories frequently describe individual longing and loss, emotional and cultural alienation as well as different facets of Bengali life and culture, social aspects, attitude and upbringing. References to Bengali locales, Bengali names and phrases, Bengali customs and costumes, literature, mannerism, cooking and cuisine like rice and fish, festivals/rituals like annaprasan, songs by Nazrul and Tagore, films of Ritwik Ghatak and Satyajit Ray are abundant. Tradition bound married Bengali women, applying crushed vermillion to their hair, and wearing saris brought carefully from home, crowd her stories. There is elaborate description of prewedding religious rites too, about how a Bengali Hindu marriage is negotiated and how the actual ceremony is observed. For immigrant Bengalis food is linked with identity, serving as a
slice of native life. Lahiri has shown that there are lots of things Bengalis miss while not at home but food is still the one thing they really hold on to. Her use of food as metaphor for home and the connection between people is elaborately discussed.

As the novelist narrates the daily lives of her Bengali characters we get even minor details of their behavior and culture that characterise and define them. Bengalis are shown to be a community that is defined by a tendency to participate in the lives of others rather than a responsibility not to interfere or be in any way intrusive to the lives of others the way it is in America. Bengalis have a different brand of hospitality from that of the Americans; they are people who would go out of their way to accommodate others.

Longing for the home left behind is intense for first-generation Bengali immigrants who then search for compatriots and form a close-knit Bengali community to belong to. The need to belong is constantly reinforced by their get-togetherness; apart from regular weekend adda-s, they get together routinely on Bengali festivals as well as other special occasions like the rice and name ceremonies of their children, their birthdays, marriages, deaths, and pujos-s, wearing their best traditional attires, thus trying to inculcate their traditions in an alien land. Each of them becomes part of a makeshift extended Bengali family. The older members of the group share nuggets of wisdom which the new ones might find useful in this alien land. It is a displaced community’s urge to protect their young, however distant or practically unknown they might be, from the anxieties of dislocation.

Seven stories of Lahiri’s first work, The Interpreter of Maladies deal with diasporic Bengalis while two are set in the actual geographical location of Bengal exclusively treating native Bengali characters in the backdrop of traditional beliefs, superstitions and ways of life. Her portrayal of the subalterns not only throws light on some of the human maladies of Bengali society back in the 1980s but raises the issue of home as well: the sense of being unhoused, isolated in one’s native city even when one is surrounded by the same people as him/her.

Lahiri’s apparently personal narratives can thus engage themselves in serious socio-economic, historical and political discourse: there are references to the predicament of marginalised Bengali social groups in native Bengal, the 1971 War as a reaffirmation of Bengali togetherness, the 1947 Partition of India along religious lines – an event that also ensured the
geo-political divide of Bengal etc. Her narratives finally talk about a land and a people indivisible in the face of the politics of difference.

In The Namesake Lahiri uses the space of a novel to revisit the lives of the characters she explores with her characteristic subtlety and compassion in her short stories. Her Bengalis here are apparently a close-knit ethnic group, still far from being fully assimilated into the general current of life around them. Reflecting on the power of names as markers of identity, Jhumpa Lahiri takes the reader through the life of a second-generation Bengali US immigrant, Gogol Ganguli. She delineates with insight and empathy how two generations of the Ganguli family come to terms with their similar—yet different—lives and how, despite resistance and alienation, manage to build a bridge to each other.

The Namesake foregrounds the tradition/practice of Bengali nomenclature as the assertion of a distinctive cultural identity both in anasporic and diasporic spaces. The practice of assigning two names to one individual and the implications of its practice in America where such distinction of names does not exist resonate throughout the novel. However, in a broader sense, it is not about names per se, but about certain ideas, values and genes—the whole complex set that everyone inherits from his/her parents; and no matter how much one creates one’s own life, one finds it difficult to escape one’s origins.6

Immigrant parents in Lahiri's stories appreciate the opportunity of raising their children in America; as we see, Lilia’s mother considers her daughter lucky, because, she has escaped the drudgery of Kolkata—a place more prone to disease, disorder, discomfort and insecurity, a place full of problems and unable to provide an easy life, a fine education. In Memories of Rain, even Moni who is disillusioned with London, shares the angst and disgust of the diasporic desi mother; she cannot imagine flinging her child into such a life. However, although the parents are glad that their children are getting the “best education” in the world, they are nevertheless suspicious and fearful about the alien culture and its influence upon their child. The conflict between academic and economic success in a foreign country and a lingering guilt-ridden conscience born out of having left their roots behind never fails to haunt them.

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However, while Lahiri’s characters remain self-conscious of their ethnicity, they participate in the host culture through their professions, human relationships, raising children, through continuous cultural negotiations. Many first generation Bengalis like Ashoke could fit into the category of “accomodationists.” In their work place they adopt the norms of the host society immersing themselves into mainstream economic life; but at home they wish to protect the native culture they so cherish. This “ad-hocism” of adjustment allows them to preserve their cultural identity at home without it in anyway impinging on their economic goals.

Baffled by their parents’ double standards and by the pressure of inhabiting a space between two cultures, never fully a part of the old or the new, the younger generation often grows rebellious and defiant. Born and brought up in America, they cannot really enter the emotional territory of their immigrant parents and cannot respond to their parents’ cultural nostalgia, though ironically at the same time, they cannot escape that unlived, uncharted territory. Interestingly, in a diasporic condition, as Lahiri shows, the lack of communication gap between parents and children in turn serves to strengthen bonds between siblings, bonds emerging out of a sense of being “fellow sufferers,” facing similar bewilderment and confusion.

Lahiri’s characters gradually learn to cope with the new environment; and she describes both the excitements and loneliness of making cultural negotiations. She shows how the characters feel relief when they adjust to their new world while simultaneously feeling regretful at the separation from their original culture. Mrs. Sen’s severe homesickness and sense of isolation is contrasted with the adaptability of other first generation women like Lilia’s mother and Mala. Again, in The Namesake, after her husband’s death, when Ashima prepares to leave for Kolkata, she feels warmth for her American home which she had resisted for so many years, and finally decides to divide her time between the two “homes.” Their survival through trials of migrating across continents is hailed as a sort of achievement, “conquering a new world.” The authorial suggestion is clear: the exiled needs to be adaptive/assimilative like these women in order to survive in an “unaccustomed earth.”

Ashima’s and Moushumi’s perspectives – with regard to home, family and other issues – are opposite to each other epitomising further the distance between first and second generation Bengali women living in America. Unlike her mothers’ generation, Moushumi does not want to be fully dependent on her husband. First generation Bengalis’ conservative outlook regarding sex
and marriage is often flouted by their children who prefer the “liberal” atmosphere prevailing in American society. They do not mind entering into several pre-marital and extra-marital relationships. And also the traditional concept of the “sacrosanct” bond of matrimony does not hold much appeal for these Bengali children in the “new” world; they do not consider it their duty to stay married for ever, as Bengalis of their parents’ generation do. That pressure has given way to “American commonsense” (Namesake 276). Again, Bengali parents expect their child to marry another Bengali, but the child is not always happy to oblige; he sees no reasons, as his parents do, for not marrying an American/English and the number of interracial marriages is on the increase. Lahiri’s stories thus feature Bengali arranged marriages as well as love marriages and mixed ones without favouring any particular kind.

Lahiri’s stories throw light on some of the important social and gender issues – the status of women in society and the institution of marriage as it operates among Bengalis both in diaspora and anaspora. Bengali wives like Chitra and Aparna are “archetypal female immigrants”7 in Lahiri’s world - anachronistic, disempowered, and infused with notions of resignation and unquestioning suffering. Ashima who has never uttered her husband’s name even after his death represents the values and world-view of first generation Bengali women who religiously conform to traditional norms and spend their lives mainly as homemakers following their husbands and looking after their children. The second generation Bengali girls like Sonia and Moushumi break the status quo: they refuse to walk along their mothers’ path.

The first generation Bengali families in America, as we see, retain their patriarchal divide of women’s place and the man’s responsibility in a marriage. Importantly however, despite their sense of isolation and dislocation, even in their bleakest hours of homesickness Bengali women see reasons to celebrate their life in “unaccustomed earth” which seem to offer certain amount of freedom and liberty – refused to them in the mother country – to articulate themselves.

In spite of the slightly ironic tone employed throughout the Lahiri narratives, the final impression is that of an obsession with and a nostalgic involvement/admiration for Bengali tradition and culture. The Bengalis in her fiction do not seem to have surrendered themselves to the culture of adoption; rather they take the risk of exercising choices. We see that the first

generation diaspora cherishes and retains memories of its homeland and keeps the bond alive through visits, phone calls, observing rituals and seeking repose and consolation in the letters received from home. They eagerly wait for the moment of their actual visit to the country; for them, the journey home not only satisfies a nostalgic impulse but is needed to reclaim the past, to find the reassurance of self and belonging. And their networking with each other – based on their shared history – brings in a sense of solidarity which reverses for them the concept of homelessness. But for the second-generation, things are different; Gogol and Sonia do not feel at home in Kolkata where they know their parents find solace. Therefore after every annual enforced trip to Kolkata, the children yearn to get back to their western ways while the parents retreat into the safety of their Bengali community in America.

Gogol experiences an emotional turbulence and bewilderment, is torn by a mixed feeling of love and hatred for his parents and “parents’ homeland” and is somewhere unable to fully catch up with the western culture too. He tries to reject the past and sever ties with his Bengali heritage. His rejection of his parents’ world however, is anything but complete. It is only when he reclaims and owns his past that he can integrate himself with his existence, with his roots and familial ties. He thus continues to be both a Bengali, and an American professional. The acceptance of this ambivalence and negotiating accordingly highlights the authorial suggestion that the salvation in the diaspora’s disquiet journey lies in adopting the assimilationist approach involving the acceptance of the realities of an alien way of life while maintaining bonds with the homeland to replenish the inevitable emotional bankruptcy.8

Lahiri’s latest work, Unaccustomed Earth, once again tells the stories of two generations of Bengali immigrants struggling to build secure and stable lives for themselves in “unaccustomed earth”, accepting with excitement and anxiety the necessity of leaving behind the constrictions and comforts of the native way of life. While revisiting a similar set of characters trying to negotiate conflicting values and loyalties, Lahiri’s new book tends to lean more towards the experience of second generation immigrants. Unlike Interpreter of Maladies, none of the stories in Unaccustomed Earth directly use Bengal as setting. Although references to Bengal keep cropping up, sometimes literally, sometimes more figuratively, through the memory of the

characters, one realises unmistakably that America is a real presence in the book; and “the characters must struggle and come to terms with what it means to live here, to be brought up here, to belong and not belong here.”

It is commonly assumed that second generation expatriates have seemingly fewer battles to fight. The Namesake however is animated by the counterintuitive insight that the second generation’s sense of dislocation can be, in its way, harder to deal with than the full-fledged transplantation traumas of the “home-bred” parent pioneers. In her new stories Lahiri pursues that theme. In various stages of setting up home, her Bengali-Americans feel betrayed yet awed by their parents. Part of the burden they live with is the unspoken ambivalence about elders who, against great odds, managed a feat that daunts their offspring. Well-aware of their own advantages, with their accent-free English and freedom from old world customs, these US-born young adults still cannot help feeling adrift.

Generally, in Lahiri’s representation, the first generation is a rather conservative community: it adheres to the traditional Bengali cultural protocol that is sensitive to taboos, less open to sexuality or alcoholism and very much protective about children; it does not endorse western forms of individual liberalism, does not approve public gestures of affection so much so that even among married Bengali couples love exists as “an utterly private, uncelebrated thing” (Namesake 138). The Bengali parents do not believe in baby-sitters; they want to keep close to their children even after they have grown up, like Ashima who cannot fathom her children’s early assertion of individuality, insistence on independence, their need to keep their distance from her, their live-in relationships – marks of their upbringing in a western society.

Lahiri brings out the static quality which nostalgia confers upon a cocooned culture and the manner in which self-imposed ghettoisation interrupts the process of acceptance of and by the host culture. Generally, the immigrant Bengali children do not want to be trapped by the constricting ghetto experience; they enjoy the lack of restrictions of American/British society. They become increasingly westernised incorporating themselves to the patterns of the dominant culture: they reluctantly sit in pujos; they savour American food more than Bengali dishes. They are often so anxious to assimilate that they hurt their parents in ways they scarcely recognise.

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The adolescents cannot afford the sense of “exclusion.” That they do not wish to appear different from other children induces them to avoid native ways and the language of their parents as well as their parents’ choice of food and dress. However interestingly, although Lahiri’s immigrant children themselves are critical about their ancestral culture/homeland, they cannot bear criticism of the same from their white friends, evidenced, for example, by Moushumi’s break-up with Graham.

The second generation’s role in this immigrant community often serves as a sort of bridge between the “old world” ways of their parents and the “new American” ones. Sonia plays the catalyst drawing her mother into a more American lifestyle, helping her to break away from the old mould of the perpetually self-sacrificing mother or the unobtrusive widow who must never gratify herself. The parents are forced to integrate into the American way of living for the sake of their children, thereby addressing the tension between assertion and assimilation. The Gangulis now celebrate Christmas with progressively increasing fanfare as the children look forward to it far more than the worship of Durga and Saraswati. These negotiations reflect the slowly changing perspective of the older generation who gradually learn to give up the rigid hold of their past and alternate their behaviour in terms of the need of the situation.

Lahiri’s new collection raises the issue of teen alcoholism, particularly sensitive for the usually conservative Bengali-American community. However, apart from characters like the alcoholic dropout brother or Bengali housewives, the community tends to be uniformly successful, well-educated and well-situated to the point of ostentation: many of them are involved in inter-racial romances; they go to Harvard and expensive boarding schools; they study at Columbia’s Butler Library and discuss Homer; they are doctors, engineers and academics rendering Lahiri’s representation almost homogenous, and therefore, limited.

The stories of Lahiri throw light on some of the core questions that concern the old and new generation Bengalis in America. Lahiri talks about the Bengali emigrant parents’ struggles to raise a family in a country very different from theirs, to keep their children acquainted with Bengali culture and traditions, literature and history and guide them about their religious customs, beliefs, food habits and social etiquettes. She talks about the traditional Bengali culture of interdependence, protection and attachment. Her Bengalis do not exist in isolation, they exist in relation to others, they deeply value family and blood ties; her books thus present a
congregation of siblings, parents, spouses, relatives and a compassionate inspection of the fissures, disappointments and importance of deep attachment.

Many of her stories reflect the Bengali educated immigrants' view that education is a major, perhaps the only, means to climb social rungs and strike roots firmly in the adopted home. The Bengali parents expect their American son or daughter to become distinctively educated and to attain optimum success in their fields. Various characters in the books epitomise the Bengali pride in education.

Thus in her fiction Lahiri introduces her western readers majorly to Bengali well-educated, uppercaste Hindus who came to the US in the late 1960s to work in the medical and engineering professions or to teach in universities. But it is not that in America Bengalis always come for economic reason. There are Bengalis from wealthy families who had summered in hill stations and attended expensive boarding schools back home. The diasporic situation, however, proves to be a great leveller; the differences of class, caste and wealth are irrelevant here where all are equally alone; and as for the second generation, caste hardly rears its head. Hema's and Koushik's parents, coming from two totally different socio-economic backgrounds, had liked one another in America only for the sake of their common Bengali origins, for the sake of a time and place to which they had lost access. Their children however are never drawn to anyone merely for that reason.

In her writings Lahiri has not consciously flaunted ethnic exoticism; of course the "exotic" factor is bound to be there to an extent as she is writing about people from a particular ethnic background not very familiar to a wide section of her readership, but still her fiction stands different from the exotic outpourings of most of the Indian immigrants writing in English for whom "home" provides a canvas for magical interpretations enabling them to spoon-feed western readers information about race and migration.

Because of a diasporic upbringing, it is not easy for writers like Lahiri to portray the nuances of the culture back home and to get inside the skin of a home grown character that is shaped by that culture. Still, to all appearances, Lahiri's Das-es and Sens are instantly recognisable as any other Bengali. Again, Lahiri's knowledge of Bengal, according to her own admission, is limited not only by her own lack of proximity but also by the fact that her parents' impressions - the principal resource of her knowledge about the land and the culture - have also
been arrested in time; yet her translations/images of Bengal and Bengalis still evoke “the illusion of cultural accuracy and resonance.” 10

Overview: Fifth Chapter

The penultimate chapter of my thesis analyses in detail Adib Khan’s images of Bengal and questions the representational economics of the author’s dealing with various socio-economic, political, religious and cultural issues with special reference to Seasonal Adjustments and Spiral Road. His other fictional/non-fictional works are also briefly discussed as they share some common concerns with the two primary texts: Solitude of Illusions for example, introduces themes such as individual responsibility to retain family honour – concepts traditionally given high importance in society; again, the debate about cultural and religious purity within the Urdu speaking Muslim community of Kolkata vis-a-vis Old Delhi depicted in Solitude of Illusions originates from the similar fundamentalist mindset which led, as Khan implies in Seasonal Adjustments, the West Pakistanis to treat Bengalis as impure Muslims who, even after winning the national election, could not be allowed to rule “Islamic Pakistan.” Also, the fictional delineation of the Vietnam War and associated moral issues in Homecoming are pertinent to the understanding of the author’s perspective on the Bangladesh War of 1971 in both Seasonal Adjustments and Spiral Road. Apart from these, Manzurul Islam’s Burrow (2004), a novel tagging the same pessimistic line as Khan’s, and Rainbow Over Padma by S.M. Ali - which incidentally shares the publication year with Seasonal Adjustments- offering a narrative of hope and possibilities have been discussed as well.

Seasonal Adjustments – set in Dhaka as well as in Shopnogonj which is cast as “a replica of the thousands of villages which confirm the rural primitivism of Bangladesh” (Seasonal 11) – is clearly a pessimistic documentation of a country and its people; it projects the country’s history as a grim catalogue of chaos, army coups and political agitations, of poverty, hunger, insurmountable corruption and “the fragile semblance of democracy.” The chapter examines the authenticity of this vision of a “wasteland” and argues that Khan’s images are in line with orientalist stereotyping and also has to do with the author’s own sense of guilt. It also notes how

the religious bigotry and racial prejudices that the protagonist faces in Australia have been paralleled by the unearthing of the same evils back home in Bengal.

The chapter also discusses other themes of his novels: the dialectics between the various strands within Islam – liberal, orthodox/fanatic as well as syncretistic Islamic traditions within Bengali society, how the common cultural legacy the Bengali Muslims share with fellow Hindus have often made them suspect in the eyes of the self_claimed true believers in Islam, the ambivalent native perception about probashi Bengalis, and the theme of loyalty and betrayal to the native tradition. Besides, Khan’s frequent use of Bangla words, phrases and idioms, often in their original is also discussed.

In Seasonal Adjustments Khan tries to take into account everything that he comes across: street scenes, urban settings, social rituals, intellectual life, bureaucracy, daily labourers, servants, beggars, mullahs, and impressions of family and friends. Though the novel aspires to be a social document and a political novel, it does not seem to have established its interpretation by an up_to_date observation of concrete socio_political realities; sometimes it appears to be an outsider’s account inflicted by an indifferent superior gaze; sometimes a bit clichéd, and exaggerated. Nevertheless, it manages finally to provide some valuable insights into the moral perplexities and practical sufferings that the community goes through.

Khan’s narrative critiques the sexism nurtured by cultural traditions back home; in such a tradition_bound societal structure, he shows, gender demarcations govern male and female behaviour since childhood; it is not only the traditional institution of arranged marriage that limits the free will of women, traditions also impede choice in their education, employment and sexuality. Societal and gender expectations are internalised to such an extent that his protagonists who like to think themselves “progressive” cannot escape from collective prejudices.

Khan’s narratives offer glimpses of pre_war agitation in the 1960s in the then East Pakistan that led to the 1971 war, and also its aftermath – a newly created Bangladesh just recovering from a bloody war, anxious to establish its distinct identity. They record that for the people of the East wing of Pakistan, cultural and linguistic identities supplanted religious identity and this was the predominant divisive factor. From the beginning, the resistance movement
emphasised a Bengali identity as separate from a common Pakistani identity. This distinctness was deployed, in turn, as a weapon against the Bengalis by the West wing.

In the post war Bangladesh there were efforts to construct a heroic image of the Bengali on the premise of his "valorous" participation in the Liberation War but Khan’s delineation of the same is devoid of any glory about it; he problematises the issue by elaborately dealing with the moral perplexities his protagonists undergo because of their association with the war. Critics suspect that the narrator/author’s “laudable moral outrage” is not only aimed at a particular phase of history, rather it links up with “the other negative observations” aimed at justifying his decision to be a migrant.¹¹ The portrayal of the struggle as violent, bloody and not one-sided is captured quite unambiguously when Khan registers the underside of the picture, the not so noble acts of Bengali “patriots,” especially their indiscriminate killing – after their victory in December 1971 – of the Biharis who were suspected by them to be the collaborators of the Pakistan Army. References to the tortured birth of a nation whose soul is “deformed by loathing” signify Khan’s self-conscious striving not to romanticise this resistance movement or for that matter, the aftermath of it, very much unlike what we find in the dominant discourse – in historical records, fiction and films based on the theme of liberation. In this connection, Tahmina Anam’s debut novel A Golden Age which is set in 1971, in a tumultuous landscape that East Pakistan was then, is relevant; like Khan, Anam not only brings to life the yearnings of a people, but also makes us confront the same question: What does love for one’s country mean at an individual level?

Khan’s narrative, by exposing the colonial mentality of West Pakistan and the derogatory, discriminatory treatment of Bengalis as a race at the hand of West Pakistanis, makes it clear that for Bengalis in East Pakistan the British had only been replaced by another colonial regime. In the same way, it demonstrates that the kind of neo-colonialist structures that emerges from post-war politics in Bangladesh is no different from the networks of power that preceded and triggered off the liberation struggle itself, and that the Bengalis are left with merely a reinvention of the same structures of domination. In the newly independent Bangladesh, he reveals, the army, the bureaucracy, the elite and political opportunists combine to forge a vicious nexus of power to rule the country according to their own whims.

Also, Khan’s writings expose the existence of religious opportunism and superstition in the society; people with religious zeal are his object for sustained ridicule and caricature. Khan’s perspective has been shaped by his direct exposure to xenophobia, the aggressive nature of nationalism at home and abroad which he discusses elaborately in his illuminating essay “In Janus’ Footsteps” from which I have quoted extensively. In Australia, the narrator’s father-in-law Keith insisted on his granddaughter’s baptism, just as back home his mother could not hide her racial intolerance and prejudice against his Australian wife.

In his latest work, Spiral Road, Khan has embedded a terrorist plot into a story of family secrets that has tragic repercussion on the family members and tests the traditional overriding value of family loyalty. Compared to Seasonal Adjustments, this time he has certainly ventured into a more ambitious canvas tying issues of identity and belonging, the notion of family and homeland to the rise of terrorism home and abroad. The plot centres on the lives of the Alams, a proud and aristocratic Bengali family who discover that one of their younger members is involved with a terrorist group based in the hilly region in southeastern Bangladesh, an area which has a volatile history of its own.

Masud Alam who comes to visit Dhaka to see an ill father and reconnect with a family with whom he had virtually no contact for years, soon finds himself entangled in the mire of international terrorism and counter terrorism. Knowing of his uncle’s past as a fighter, his nephew Omar who returned home – after being severely tortured in the US in the wake of 9/11 – to join a domestic terror cell, seeks to draw Alam into the jihadist orbit.

The authorial intent might be to emphasise more on the corrosive effects of terrorism on a family rather than the politics of terrorism itself; nonetheless, the movement does often seem to tower over more personal stories. Several Islamic political parties as well as individuals with terrorist links are identified in the book. Through the ASIO spy Mills’ argument that as the majority of the population in Bangladesh follows Islam “it is only conceivable that there could be terrorist centers here” (238), the novel underlines the origin of terrorism in communal/racial prejudice and hatred, and the truth that the war against terrorism is no better than the terrorism it attempts to counter.

Spiral Road’s returning son has “dark corners” of his own memory, his experience as a fighter for Bangladesh’s freedom from Pakistan shook him out of certainty: he is deeply
convinced now that no political or religious programme was worth the deaths of innocents. His choice of an inconspicuous life abroad is deliberate, influenced by the events that saw him hailed as a hero and yet left him damaged in soul.

One inevitable aspect of the novel seems to be an attempt to make sense of what prompts young Bengali Muslims go the “fanatic” way; the narrator, instead of being judgmental or accusing, tries rather to decipher the disillusionment that his nephew goes through. The fact that Masud himself had his own grand rhetoric of patriotic duties disintegrated, and his past credentials of being different avatars to different parties during the liberation war, facilitate his understanding of Omar’s transformation.

Khan’s novels also provide insights into the disintegration of old fangled values of the Zamindari era when conflicted with the more egalitarian concepts of the post-Zamindari period. Before the Partition of India, the local landowners – as allies of British colonial masters – enjoyed ranks of power and influence as de facto administrators in rural Bengal. Even after the Partition – when their wealth and social standing diminished – they clung to the illusion of former control and glory. To the landowners are now added the religious mullahs, both of whom are still influential in many parts of rural areas, and sometimes in conflict, sometimes in nexus, to maintain their respective dominance in the prevalent power structure.

The sketches of rural and urban locations exist as distinct, different topoi in Khan’s novels. We have recurrent descriptions of the six seasons of Bengal with their distinctive flavour and colour, the monsoonal rains, the bright tropical greenness of the paddy fields, huge water lilies crowding the surface of a small pond, wild ducks gliding in the pond; but against the backdrop of all engulfing poverty in the country, the marvellous natural beauty of rural Bengal appears “like a bad-tempered step-parent showering moments of guilt-ridden generosity on a maltreated child” (Seasonal 31).

The landscapes and human images of the city of Dhaka appear to be teeming with all the features of urban menace. From the description of the various locations and their respective traits we are aware of the contrast between urban and rural Bengal. While urban Bengal is portrayed as unsuccessfully trying to hide real poverty through few superficial modernist developments, rural Bengal emerges as starkly primitive: the embarrassing poverty and subhuman condition of living
of the majority of the population make the narrator of *Seasonal Adjustments* contemplate: “Are Bengalis in some ways naturally deficient?”(42) He discards the myths of the once-affluent Bengal concocted by proud, nostalgic Bengalis. The truth for him remains that from the ancient period till the Pakistan days, Bengal has always been the step-child of history, treated as deficient, as inferior.

The description of various locales of the city of Dhaka and its suburbs allows the novels to bring into surface some primary socio-economic traits of present day Bangladesh. The narrative presents an image of Bangladesh as a country where day-to-day life is full of problems: population explosion, unemployment, insecurity of life, poverty and hunger, growth of Islamic fundamentalism and terrorism, massive corruption and inefficiency of the governmental machinery, deplorable conditions of women, the unequal distribution of wealth and unimaginable gap between the rich and the poor etc. However, *Spiral Road* is not as dark as *Seasonal Adjustments*. Through Aleya, an energetic woman industrial entrepreneur (who complains that people who settle overseas would like to keep things back home as they are so that they can continue to be objects of their curiosity, and their remembrance of the past is not threatened), *Spiral Road* talks about signs of positive changes: the hourly initiatives taken by various individuals and institutions for the economic and social empowerment of women, the spread of education and creation of jobs for rural women. She reports how women have begun to enjoy freedom; they hold important government posts now, and the private sector employs them more readily. They are also coming into business. But still “too much ignorance and gender bias” and influence of “fundamentalist mullahs” (63) prevail in areas like Manikpur, projected in the novel as a case study of a typical Bangladeshi village of today and its way of life.

Khan’s description of beggars’ processions in the streets of Dhaka in *Seasonal Adjustments* to voice their “rights” is clearly an exaggerated account as is Monica Ali’s news of Bangladeshi students’ demonstrations for the right of copying in examinations. And also honour-killings are not a frequent event in the country. Again, the implication that in present day Bangladesh there is a growing trend of exclusively “Islamic” teachings provided by the madrasas – as as opposed to the schools and colleges which provide “secular” education – does not quite reflect the country’s prevailing education scenario where madrasa education was never the mainstream. True, there remains a section in the Bengali Muslim society, who would send their
children to madrasas for strictly “religious” reasons, but still, majority of Bengali Muslims want their children to be educated in schools and colleges, and that for very practical reasons – for better social and economic opportunities.

*Seasonal Adjustments* comments humorously on the underlying hypocrisy of the conservative Bengalis’ sexual mores and behaviour which is not expressive of sexuality and where one needs to develop “many trite symbols and coy gestures to signal amorous intentions” (137). *Spiral Road* also reveals that in wealthy patriarchal families, where Khan’s protagonists belong, the talk of love was almost forbidden and matrimony was intended to enhance status and wealth. There were unwritten codes of behaviour for a married couple: as long as the institution of marriage was seen to promote the virtues of family life, a degree of fallibility or fleshly indiscretions was acceptable in men.

Through the portrait of Nadine in *Seasonal Adjustments* Khan highlights the distance of the second generation of diasporic Bengalis from their parents’ homeland and culture; this distance gets even more punctuated when the children come from mixed marriages, as in her case. Khan’s view is that the second generation migrant’s cultural pulse is tuned to a different rhythm, where the original homeland appears more foreign than the actual “foreign” land. Khan’s protagonists realise that for the immigrant there are no easy answers, that they have “sacrificed the right to belong” (*Seasonal* 117). At the end of *Seasonal Adjustments* the protagonist decides to return to Australia despite his marginalised existence there, despite the fact that in Australia he has nothing he can really call his own. For, though it is not anything near perfect, it is still “a very livable country”; and like any other Australian he too has been “seduced by the common dream of a brick-veneer house on a quarter of an acre of land” (122).

*Common Images and Comments*:

Khan thus seems to offer an apparent resolution to the home/diaspora crisis – ultimately premised on the assumption that in Bangladesh things are too bad to permit one to lead a normal life; the pressures of life in a hostile environment are thus preferable to problems in the mother country. *Brick Lane* has a more complex approach to the issue where characters nurture different ideas about home and the text has no one stance to offer. Though the fairy-tale “home” of Bangladesh is rejected
either in favour of an immigrant status or with an alternative, tightly-knit, newly discovered home in England by some of the characters, unlike Khan's novel, *Brick Lane* does not quite write off the country. Yet, both Ali's and Khan's images of Bengal and Bengalis seem to me darker and a bit exaggerated, while those of Gupta and Lahiri are more sympathetic and nostalgic.

The materials and worldview of the authors derive substantially from their personal experience as immigrants or as children of immigrant parents. The texts dealt here are thus primarily narratives of personal histories, narratives which return to the homeland in many ways, the writing process itself becoming an "intrinsic attribute of home." As Adib Khan once said, "In a sense, writing has become a residence, a place I can call home."

The diasporic Bengalis come across new orientations to their originary culture as they negotiate between the foreign and the familiar to grow and be stable in diasporic life. As we know, what seems crucial to any diaspora is a sense of displacement and the inability to belong, of not being a comfortable insider in either community. One common factor of alienation stems from emotionally dwelling on what once was; in the case of Bengali immigrant-protagonists here, one can identify a triple alienation: first from his/her native land, next from the adopted homeland, and finally from what the former has become during the years he/she has been away.

The stories here are in fact predominantly urban portraits; there are descriptions of rural Bengal here and there, but more often than not, the pleasant sense of rural peace is overshadowed by urban squalor. The picture of two chaotic and unmanageable metropolises, Dhaka and Kolkata, emerging from the novels of Khan and Gupta, perhaps reflects the typical Bengali discomfort and inability in living in cities and may be a reminder of the Bengalis' essentially rural heritage.

The representation of Bengal and Bengalis in diasporic fictional narratives by Bengalis seems to be different from the treadmill exotic outpourings of Indian immigrant writing in English: the exploration of Bengali life and culture pervades the texts – it is not artificially imposed for anthropological glamour, though maybe limited and superficial/clichéd at times. And one of the reasons behind the authors' being accused (not always, of course) of tarnishing

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the image of Bengalis must be that the expatriates want to look good to foreigners, and so, exposure of anything negative, whether real or fabricated enrage them.

The Bengali diaspora scattered across various parts of the world has been a part and symbol of the larger Bengal; what happens back home thus spills over into the diaspora as well. The diaspora cannot get fully assimilated into the host country or cannot be totally absorbed into Bengal upon its return home. The diasporic cultural space is the space that immigrants occupy almost perpetually since assimilation is an ongoing process and no full assimilation ever takes place. The books map the divergent angles of vision and emotion that obstruct, even as they broaden, the characters’ search for a sense of belonging and insist that neither dislocation nor absorption can be total: there has to be an ongoing engagement with multiple complex realities when one is living in a diasporic condition.

One broad theme shared by the authors I study concerns the achieving of a general cultural adjustment with the predominantly western ethos together with an anxiety to come to terms with native heritage. Another cluster of themes that is common to all these authors has to do with cross-cultural relationships, political upheavals and the violence accompanying events such as the Partition and the war leading to the independence of Bangladesh. Some of the short stories and novels predominantly focus on women’s experience of displacement and relocation, and the lot of women, whether living in Bengal or as immigrants in the West. Going home to Bangladesh is not an easy solution available to immigrant women; and this is true for men too, as Ali, for example, gives the impression that it is foolish to return like Chanu. However, while there is nostalgia for the homeland, only a few have any definitive reason or objective of coming back. The diasporic Bengalis nurture “sentimental attachments to a distant homeland but no real desire for permanent return.”14 While the characters across generations display both retentionist and integrationist tendencies it is the characters hailing directly from Bengal who display this ambivalence most vividly. It is interesting that women especially from the second generation have a much easier time in adapting to the western culture than their male counterparts from either generation.

Generally, the authors have celebrated cultural hybridity and the energy of new immigrants. Another theme is that of the exiles’ return to a country that has changed and the search for roots. The other noticeable aspect is – while in Bharati Mukherjee’s and others’ works the portrayal of illegal immigrants living in fear and isolation constitute a significant part of characterisation – all of the characters of the present authors reach the new land by lawful routes. The overwhelming appearance of the first generation women who immigrated with their husbands in the 1960s in the narratives of female Bengali diasporic writers makes their stories seem to revolve around the same marriage, migration and identity paradigms. The recent years however witness an ever increasing number of Bengali women, including those of the second generation, who are making the choice to stay in the West to realise their educational and professional ambitions.

A parallel narrative featuring the anguish and consequences of a historical homeleaving is not so marginal in these novels; this is the subcontinental diaspora created post-partition – the diaspora of the millions of refugees who dispersed or were forced to migrate from their homeland to the “promised land” of India/Pakistan. Sunetra Gupta’s novels engage with the hidden angst, anger and decadence of well-off East Bengali Hindus who had to start afresh and build everything anew as refugees in India. In A Sin of Colour, Debendranath’s mother Nirupama’s father was forced to pack his bags and move his large family to Calcutta, where they lived in the cramped southern fringes of the city and struggled to make ends meet. Lahiri also touches upon the condition of refugees from East Bengal iconised by Boori Ma in Kolkata. Khan on the other hand hints at the predicament of Urdu-speaking Biharis in the war-torn East Bengal/the newly-independent Bangladesh.

The issue of loyalty and betrayal with regard to one’s “own” culture is recurrent in their writings. Khan’s protagonist’s migrating from a war-ravaged land was considered not only as an act of greed but of being an opportunist, a “traitor to the Bengali cause” (140). The ambivalent native perception about probashi Bengalis is exposed through Khan’s narrator’s observation that despite the common stigma of betrayal and selfishness attached to the character of the people who have left the country, their living abroad adds to their social standing. It is bidesh to which many Bengalis aspire and the fictions here project their eagerness to enter “the land of hope and glory” they pretend to hate. At home the migrants are usually considered rich and successful.
This is partly the result of relative standards of living and expectations: to landless villagers in Bangladesh, anyone living in Britain or America is prosperous. However, although the wealth of the West is admired, western culture is not seen as desirable; many people believe the West to be plagued by sexual immorality, alcoholism, divorce and a lack of familial stability.

Narratives from the Bengali diaspora also expose the ironic anglophilia of the Bengalis. As Khan describes from his experience of being raised in Dhaka in the 1950s and ’60s, the postcolonial subcontinent was still strongly affected by the cultural and institutional legacy it had inherited from the British. For many educated Bengali parents it was inconceivable that their children would not attend a school where English was not the language of instruction. Again, like many middle-class and elite Bengalis in Calcutta, the former colonial capital, Moni is deeply anglophilic; her curriculum as an English Honours student, as well as the intellectual training inculcated by her brother and his group, inspire her to look up to the British cultural canon as the ideal and London as the revered site of pilgrimage. Brick Lane’s Chanu too, in his unmistakable anglophilic streak and his simultaneous longing for an autonomous Bengali culture, epitomises the ambivalent mindset of educated middle class Bengalis towards their erstwhile colonisers.

The novels and short stories here unravel the underlying tension and communication gap between generations despite their love and affection for each other. First generation Bengalis try to recreate the ambience of their native land on the foreign soil; they expect their children to obey them, to speak their mother tongue, to follow them in their religious observances and to think and feel about the old country as they do. Their backward looking stances are seen by the second generation as regressive dissipating assimilative energies. The first generation’s life by necessity revolved around the fulfillment of material needs, the building or buying of houses, the establishment of the family on foreign soil. In comparison with their parents’ arduous and difficult lives, the children enjoyed material comforts derived from their parents’ self sacrifice and self-discipline.

The act of migration seems to separate the first generation immigrants not only from their homelands but also from their own flesh and blood. The diasporic Bengali parents are particularly worried that their children’s loss of mother tongue would completely cut them off from desh. They can foresee a day coming when their offsprings’ American side begins to gain ascendency, almost erasing their Bengali legacy. Apprehensive and desperate, they make it a
point to speak in Bengali to their children. This linguistic nostalgia, in more subtle ways, haunts the second generation too.

As educated immigrants whose children are also high achievers like them in a society that respects achievement, perhaps Lahiri’s characters have been generally shielded from racial discrimination. Khan’s characters face bigotry and racial discrimination, and it has been both consequences of ignorance as well as of hatred. In Brick Lane, convinced of the British racism that sours all dreams of integration, Chanu finally decides to return home. Sunetra Gupta’s Moni cannot penetrate the superior indifference and aloofness of either her husband or London and finally chooses to return to the bosom of Mother-Calcutta whose “tired blistered nipples” she once pushed aside with disdainful lips.

How are diasporic Bengalis to live in their uniquely complex world? The writers steer away from providing any answer prescriptively; instead, by depicting the characters’ attempts to cope with chaos, they propose to offer a complex look into the issues with which each of them must come to terms. The complexities of their narratives clearly point to a diasporic negotiation that moves beyond a simple acceptance of dominant definitions of national and cultural identity. They seem to propose a complicated yet flexible framework which involves the right for people from minority groups to be different and still belong to the dominant discourse; in effect, they call for “the positive acknowledgment of difference in and by the mainstream.”15 In Sunetra Gupta’s words: “That’s what I have chosen to do … create a space that is somewhat outside of being anywhere.”16

It is to be pointed out that the ideological importance of their writings depends not so much on their representation of diaspora as an emancipatory narrative of self-reinvention – although their poetics is, to a certain extent, committed to foregrounding the positive transformative potential of immigration – as on their ability to mine the tension that holds in balance their awareness of diaspora as a condition of loss or “unhousement,” involving a break in the link between cultures, people, identities and places on the one hand, and their

acknowledgement of it as a condition of gain or "rehousement," of recreation, re-imagi-
nation and regeneration in new social, political, cultural and geographical landscapes on the other.

"I have found it so soluble a problem to live in England assimilated yet unconverted that
the readers who come to my novels looking for the anxiety of displacement often turn away
disappointed,"17 reveals Sunetra Gupta. There is an ideological refusal here to write the narrative
of loss and "unhousement," instead Gupta and her colleagues project diasporic location to be
such a home that offers its unique challenges, and invites sustained negotiations which, they
seem to say, are worth exploring.

Bengali diasporic narratives are thus not an elegy for the diasporic condition; the texts
epitomise both excitements and anxieties of the characters' transformation from the aloofness of
expatriation to the exuberance of immigration rejecting any bleak vision of immigrant
experience. In the final analysis, in the writings of these four primary authors there are no
ideological agendas either to retain a nostalgic, essentialist conception of ethnicity or to co-opt
their characters into the hegemonic western discourse of complete assimilation. Instead they
seem to forward a case for integration in the dominant culture without any intervention of the
subtly marginalising aspects of the prevalent "melting pot" and multicultural politics.

In other words, there is neither an uncritical acceptance nor an endorsement of the
hegemonic ideology of assimilation embedded in British/American/Australian multiculturalism
as these authors are only too aware that the dynamics of fluidity and contingency inherent in the
melting pot does not really inculcate the idea of tolerance towards racial and cultural diversity,
that the exclusionary underpinnings and racism inherent in the western discourse of
multiculturalism obstruct attempts of "ethnic" citizens like them and their characters from
staking a claim to a home in the mainstream spaces of the British/American/Australian
nationhood. As Gupta explains:

I find multiculturalism -- as it is currently practiced -- to be the product of anxiety.
Multiculturalism is used as a label for marketing purposes ... Implicit within it is the
concept that it is better to be multi rather than mono, which is the biggest lie I've ever

com/essays3.asp>. Italics mine.
come across ... If anything, multiculturalism ghettoises people and stops them from building a culture. Pasting elements of people’s ancestral culture onto them, simply reinforces the idea that British culture, the culture of the country where they were born doesn’t actually belong to them. It runs counter to any idea of integration.  

In opposition to the adoption of a ghetto mentality the texts under study generally affirm the need for such negotiation, assimilation and acculturation that do not object preserving distinctive cultural traits; and they appear to discourage exclusivist adherence to what is perceived as native culture as it only makes existence at home and abroad unusually and uselessly complicated. Indeed, the biggest challenge for the authors here is to convey the need for change within their community without seeming to play into the hands of their “racial enemies.”

In fact, the texts appear to highlight the need to change and acculturate, and not to complicate things in the new land too much by sticking to the continuous nostalgic return to the old world. Authorial rejection of myopic nationalism, and identity assertion based on mutual hatred rather than mutual difference or tolerance has also been obvious in the texts. These writers do not indulge in promotion of ethnic glory. Although their instinct, thought, and memory are always quintessentially Bengali, they clearly have not taken up the responsibility of building up positive images of their native land and culture to the west. When any character romanticises Bengali culture or nostalgically indulges into the mythicised glorious past of Bengal in any of their narratives, the text provides contradictory counternarratives alongside, through subtle irony, or through other characters’ perspectives. In short, these texts, which deal with Bengal and Bengalis both in the home context and in the diasporic situation, distance themselves from exercising any simple parochial romanticisation or glorification of a particular land and humanscape, and remain useful interrogations into Bengal and Bengali identity.

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