CHAPTER-3
Spectres of Absence:
Problematics of Nostalgia

Imagine a country as this country is, peopled by characters who have abandoned their setting and who seek to plot their own story in a new way. They choose to displace themselves, to surrender the familiar . . .

some people would say that it is only a matter of adapting to a new environment, or adjusting to a custom, of learning a language.

I maintain that it is much more profound, a displacement so far-reaching that it only vanishes after several generations.

(qtd. in Abraham 50)

The above quoted words of Dutch-Canadian Novelist Aritha Van Herk foreground the impact of “diaspora-ization” (a term used by Stuart Hall) on the first generation immigrants who survive in a hyphenated space between ‘identity as natural’ and ‘identity as invention’, and cannot break out of the shell of nostalgia.

The word ‘culture’, having a polyvocal sense, includes the issues of race, class and gender in its domain; which further have the issues of human identity fall under their rubrics. Therefore cultural theory becomes a debatable space for matters such as representation,
identity, discourse, politics, ethics and aesthetics, and helps us in understanding the cultural conflict that looms large, in our globalised and globalising world, in the garb of diasporic experiences.

Cultural conflict leading to multiplicity of ‘homes’ cannot bring together ‘home’ (representing original culture) and ‘world’ (representing adopted culture). It is Homi K. Bhabha who tries to bridge this gap by understanding diaspora both as a “scattering” and a “gathering”, which he calls:

Gatherings of exiles and émigrés and refugees; gathering on the edge of foreign cultures; gathering at the frontiers; gathering in the ghettos or cafés of city centre; gathering in the half-life, half-light of foreign tongues, or in the uncanny fluency of another’s language; gathering the memories of underdevelopment, of other world lives retroactively; gathering the past in a revival; gathering the present. (139-140)

Thus, Bhabha emphasizes the concepts of heterogeneity and hybridity, and gives a new meaning to diasporic experiences of those displaced subjects who are not able to re-root themselves completely in a new soil and form a kind of “ethnic absolution”–a term used by Paul Gilroy in The Black Atlantic (1993).

The present chapter enlarges upon the concept of spectres of absence. The spectres of home or past continue to haunt the displaced women. “The present,” becomes a victim of, “what isn’t there”
(Gounelas 681), because memory continues to reconstruct the past. This ‘looking back’ on the part of the displaced women pushes them into a position of temporality, which is vulnerable to various forms of haunting. For such dislocated individuals, ‘other’ places, ‘other’ times, and the past continue to creep in and take over the present, because they do not wish to exorcise or conjure the spectre of home away. This fixation of memory allows the divided identity to create a hole in the present through which it can continue to peep into the past. In this conflicting situation, the new world does not seem to be a fantasy that neutralises the reality or actuality of the past, but rather, it is a readjustment, adaptation and participation. Insult, neglect, rejection and lack of adjustment in the adopted country continues to act as a buffer for such maladjusted psyches that cannot come out of nostalgic impulses and continue to look back in anticipation.

Edward W. Said is a prominent cultural and literary critic who has drawn substantial inspiration from a number of prominent poststructuralist and postmodernist thinkers, such as Michael Foucault, Jacques Derrida, Jurgen Habermas, Frederic Jameson, Jean-Francois Lyotard, Stephen Greenblatt and many others. His literary contribution can be categorized into three broad categories:

They are: the issues of representation of other cultures and the other; the relationship between power/domination and knowledge; and articulation of a distinct space for a possible neutral subject position
beyond the constraints of both imperialism and nationalism. (Mohanty 14)

All the three categories bring out the themes of exile, expatriate, émigré, border and insider-outsider relation in his works that highlight Said’s penetration into cultural criticism and his own experience of exile. In an interview, Said confesses: “My background is a series of displacements and expatriations which cannot ever be repeated. The sense of being between cultures has been very, very strong for me” (Salusinszky 128). Said’s own experience of ‘being between cultures’, not belonging completely to any and exploring the multi-dimensional world, are evidences of his nostalgic anchoring in the past.

Said basis his idea of ‘exile’ on the model of “Infitida”, which supports the principles of mutual recognition, making connection, and co-existing. Hovsepian remarks:

Palestinian and Arab exile is urged to adopt the model of Infitida, which entails a new sense of community woven out of the threads connecting the various domains of their distinctive life spheres. Out of these connections, new forms of co-operation can serve as the basis for living together. (Hovsepain 16)

Hence, the concepts of connection, cooperation and mutual existence in a cross-cultural scenario gives birth to a hybrid identity that is not
ready to shed its ethnicity in the process of acculturation and celebrates the merger of ‘self’ and ‘other’.

The expatriates are a kind of psychological exiles who can neither annihilate the past nor make a return to it. They are in a peculiar nostalgic position like Saladin Chamcha in Salman Rushdie’s *The Satanic Verses* (1989), who says, “When you have stepped through the looking glass, you step back at your own peril. The mirror may cut you to shreds” (58). Like Rushdie, various other eminent writers whose creations represent the nostalgic anchoring resulting from the strife between memory and reality are–V. S. Naipaul, Rohinton Mistry, Julia Alvarez, R. Radhakrishnan, Gayatry Chakravorty Spivak, Paul Gilroy, Gayatri Gopinath, Jayne O. Ifekwunigwe, Toni Morrison, Amitav Ghosh, Bessie Head, Amy Tan, Maxine Hong Kingston and others. According to Kundera “memories are only confirmations of . . . absence” (Kundera 280). All these diasporic writers use memory as a tool to re-constitute the past and prevent the present from engulfing it. Nostalgia is the fuel that sustains memory and helps such writers to create a hybrid literature that is representative of cross-cultural experiences. Similarly, the three expatriate writers under focus–Anita Desai, Bharati Mukherjee and Jhumpa Lahiri–utilize the “ontological remembering, *anamnesis*, the flashback that contains everything in brilliant detail” (Codrescu 103), to create their emigrant writings. These memory oriented creations feature the nostalgic clinging of both the author as well as the characters.
According to Stainslaw Baranczak, the words “Emigration, exile, expatriation, . . . beginning with an ‘e-’ or ‘ex-’, those sad prefixes of exclusion” (221), refer to a psychological journey into the past. Nina, in Manju Kapur’s recent fiction _The Immigrant_ (2008), is one such character who symbolises a maladjusted migrant. The moment she lands at the Toronto Airport, she faces the humiliation of being ‘othered’. Through a note she conveys her dejection to her husband:

_This is not your country. You are deceived, and you have deceived me. You made it out to be a liberal haven where everybody loved you. . . . I am the wrong colour, I came from the wrong place. See me in the Airport, of all the passengers the only one not allowed to sail through immigration, made to feel like an illegal alien._ (Kapur 108)

Though Nina emigrates to escape the “culturally subservient status of [her] home” (Gurr 8), but the truth of assimilation dawns on her like a heavy load that continues to weigh her down. “Never, for a moment, in all these years at home, had she to think about who or what she was. She had belonged. Only now was she beginning to realise how much that meant” (Kapur 157). It is this condition of homelessness, of being cut off from the roots or the past that is discussed in this chapter through the fictions of Desai, Mukherjee and Lahiri. The nostalgic characters in their works are the expatriates who “are aware of at least two (homes), and this plurality of vision gives rise to an
awareness of simultaneous dimension, an awareness (that is) contrapuntal” (Said 186).

The present research emphasises on the dialogue between cultures by utilizing Mikhail Bakhtin’s notion of ‘Dialogism’. In Bakhtin’s terms:

The world in language is half someone else’s. It becomes ‘one’s own’ only when . . . the speaker appropriates the word, adapting it to his own semantic and expressive intention. Prior to this moment of appropriation the word does not exist in a neutral or impersonal language . . . but rather it exists in other people’s mouths, serving other people’s intentions; it is from there that one must take the word and make it one’s own. (293-94)

Thus, Bakhtin’s narrative theory identified with his approach of inherent “addressivity” and “speaking across” of all language is stretched to understand it in a wider sense by incorporating it in the cultural context. The cultural interpretation of Bakhtinian “dialogics” implies that two cultures in confrontation enter into a dialogue which further leads to their contamination and construction of binaries such as self/other, marginal/dominant.

Holquist points out “literary scholars have perceived him [Bakhtin] as doing one sort of thing, linguists another and anthropologists yet another” (14). Appropriating Holquist’s idea of dialogism as a term capable of categorisation, it has been applied in
this research with reference to the dialogical encounter between different cultures and how it leads to the problematics of female identity.

According to Annie McClington, “the woman’ is enshrined as both the symbolic centre and boundary marker of the nation as ‘home’ and ‘family’” (354). Therefore, a woman who considers herself the bearer and guardian of her nationality and communal tradition cannot adapt to the new diasporic surroundings because she is in a constant search for the lost ‘nation’, ‘home’ and ‘family’. Deniz Kandiyoti, Benedict Anderson, Tom Nairn, Homi K. Bhabha, Floya Anthias and Nira Yuval Davis are some other thinkers who also believe that, “women become emblematic of the concept of ‘home’ as nation, as feminized domestic space, as a site of pure and sacred spirituality” (Grewal 7). Hence, they are not able to snap ties with their nostalgically evoked past and tradition. Nostalgia is employed by such diasporic women as a means of imagining themselves in those spaces from which they are excluded forever. Through their nostalgic imagination they try to “reconstruct the historic . . . nation despite the fact that they are migrants living away from family, home, nation and other familiar markers of identity” (Vijayasree xv).

This chapter primarily aims to study those women’s intercultural positionality who do not allow the dominant culture to overpower their ethnicity. Being the primary markers of their
communal identity, they consider it their duty to preserve and propagate their nationality and tradition in the alien space.

The spectres of the past continue to haunt the psyches of such dislocated women who can never strike roots in a new home. The ‘homing desire’ reminds them constantly that the past can neither be erased nor resurrected; and nostalgia continues to trigger their yearning for the lost home. While delineating the specific nostalgic features in the works of Desai, Mukherjee and Lahiri, an attempt has been made to classify the expatriate experiences of the dislocated women into three broad categories—alienation, ghettoization, and claustrophobic and schizophrenic tendencies.

Alienation refers to the state of exclusion, which arises when an expatriate does not grow out of the phase of nostalgia. Her ethnic identity haunts her incessantly. Aware of her differences, she cannot negotiate a new space or a new identity because expatriation for her is a state of mind. She is in a paradoxical position of “being too visible and too invisible” (Mukherjee and Blaise 169).

Another cause of alienation is the feeling of inferiority complex generated in the displaced women as they become victims of the stings of racism. They begin to feel culturally, linguistically, socially and emotionally estranged, and accept that “There is, however, no question of comparison between what I am for myself and what I am for the other” (Silverman and Elliston 161). Such alienated subjects sitting on the periphery of the past and unwilling to drift towards the
center are Lotte in Anita Desai's *Baumgartner’s Bombay*, Maya Sanyal in “The Tenant” and Blanquita in “Fighting for the Rebound” (stories in Bharati Mukherjee’s collection *The Middleman and Other Stories*); and Ashima in Jhumpa Lahiri’s *The Namesake*.

Anita Desai, an expert in delineating the ripped psyche, portrays the insecurity, alienation and anxiety of an uprooted individual through the character of Lotte in *Baumgartner’s Bombay*. Lotte "claimed to have been a gypsy who had followed her artiste parents all over the globe" (*BB* 66). She is another homeless outsider like Hugo Baumgartner who is “Accepting–but not accepted” (*BB* 20). Her experience of exile begins as a “condition of living,” and culminates as a “condition of mind” (Prasad 216).

With a desire to set roots in India, Lotte begins to devote her affection to the family of Kanti Lal (a businessman from Calcutta) whose kept she is:

> Those boys I know them when they were little. If they were sick, I made them porridge. At night I sat holding ice to their foreheads. . . . Not even a thermometer they had in the house till I went and got one. If they wanted to dress smart, I went and chose their clothes. (*BB* 77)

But after Kanti’s death, being a foreigner, Lotte becomes a victim of social norms and familial hatred. Kanti’s sons refuse to recognise her: “who is this woman? We don’t know this woman. Throw her out” (*BB* 77). She is not even allowed to visit the hospital during the last days
of Kanti: “In Calcutta, I was not even there to hold his hand” (*BB* 73). She ends up being a social and psychic alien, whose rejection leads her to eek out a precarious living by singing and dancing in the night clubs in Bombay.

Lotte’s escape from Europe to India in search of a protected life leaves her utterly dejected. Her disgust for India is evident in her words addressed to Baumgartner: “‘Dancing he talks about’ she groaned. ‘In this bloody heat and in this bloody graveyard? What a joke’” (*BB* 68). Lotte’s quest for identity ends with a desolate sense of anticipation in the aura of apprehension, which further leads to her alienation and self-annihilation. She begins to find solace in the isolated and marginal existence believing that, “only on a margin might a marginal feel at home” (Ho 100).

To disentangle from the feeling of alienation in a hostile society, Lotte and Baumgartner find solace and communion in each other’s company because for Baumgartner “she [Lotte] belonged to India of his own experiences” (*BB* 150). It is Lotte who finally identifies Baumgartner’s dead body and brings along all the postcards written to him by his *Mutti* [mother] from Germany. As she reads those postcards, “she murmured the similar, unaccustomed German, those forgotten endearments, the antique baby-language, feeling them on her tongue like crystals of sugar” (*BB* 3). After the death of Baumgartner, Lotte begins to feel doubly alienated—both from her past as well as present:
Lotte pressed her fingers to her lips, to her eyes, to her ears, trying to prevent those words, that language, from entering her, invading her. Its sweetness, the assault of sweetness, cramming her mouth, her eyes, her ears, drowning her in its sugar. The language she wanted not to hear or speak. (*BB 4*)

Therefore, Lotte’s expatriate experience is “literally an uprooting and often as withering in its effect on the mind and spirit which is deprived the sustenance it has drawn from native soil” (Joshi 2).

Through various personae in her fictions, Bharati Mukherjee explores the varied diasporic experiences ranging from expatriation, transition and immigration. Keeping the focus limited to experiences of alienation and dislocation, this chapter discusses two stories from Mukherjee’s collection *The Middleman and Other Stories*.

“The Tenant” is a story that introduces us to its protagonist Maya Sanyal, who seems divided between cultures. She neither becomes an American nor remains an Indian. Hence she undergoes double alienation. She cannot accept America and is herself rejected by the Bengali community in North America because the stories of her “indiscretions” with various men, her marriage and divorce to an American (Fred) have marked her as a “loose” woman in their eyes. She “has slept with married men, with nameless men, with men little more than boys” (“The Tenant” 103).
“Mukherjee’s art of characterization depends heavily upon contrasting the public and private selves of her principal characters . . . (Pati 197). Therefore, Maya, a professor in the English Department at the University of Northern Iowa has a superficial image of a bold adventurer who has closed all doors to her Indian past. But her divorce with her American husband (Fred) is an evidence of her retaliation against Fred’s attack on her ethnicity when he refers to both of them “as two wounded people” (“The Tenant” 112)—he being without arms and Maya, emotionally and spiritually wounded during her struggle to come to terms with America. This triggers the appalling loneliness in Maya, and she resists her ‘Indianness’ being recognised as freakish and wounded as Fred. “She knows she is strange, and lonely, but being Indian is not the same. She would have thought, as being a freak” (“The Tenant” 112). Fred’s comment foregrounds Maya’s lacerated psyche which is the consequence of being entangled in a mingled web of two completely different cultures. “She has changed her citizenship, but she hasn’t broken through into the light, the vigour, the bustle of the New World” (“The Tenant” 110).

Though Maya, “a utopian and feminist” (“The Tenant” 100), struggles to disguise herself as an American, yet her visit to Dr. Rabindra Chatterjee’s house, which is full of other Third World nationalities, drifts her back to the old world of “Brahminness” and she realizes that “nothing in Calcutta is ever lost” (“The Tenant” 104). This confrontation with the past influences Maya “to cloak” herself in
her “own Brahminical elegance” (Mukherjee, “Immigrant Writing” 28). But she finds no refuge in her community as they consider her “loose” and over-Americanised for their ethnic sensibility. This twin edged alienation “intensifies her frustration and unhooks her further from reality . . .” (Sandler 75).

Maya’s odyssey through North Carolina, New Jersey, Iowa and finally Connecticut further intensifies and problematizes her sense of belonging. Unable to stay rooted in any sexual as well as cultural relation, she finds her estrangement even more intense. Prameswaran believes that:

Some never grow past the phase of nostalgia.

Romanticizing one’s native land has a place, so long as it does not paralyze one’s capacity to develop new bonds within one’s adopted homeland. Nostalgia as the only sustenance can become quite toxic, vitiating the living stream into a stagnant cesspool. (Parameswaran 32)

Maya is one such estranged victim of nostalgia whose subconscious clinging to the past makes her a conflicted identity that remains alienated, and can never achieve wholeness and fulfilment in her life.

“Fighting for the Rebound” is yet another story by Mukherjee that deals with an emigrant’s state of exclusion. It is about Blanquita, a young aristocrat migrant from Philippines, and her struggle to succeed in America. Throughout the process of acculturation she remains conscious of the trauma involved in getting uprooted from the
native cultural traditions and values, and positioned within disparate cultures. “Fear, anger, pain, bitterness, confusion, silence, irony, humor, as well as pathos—underline her observation as she discovers for herself the undefined median between the preservation of the old world and assimilation into the new one” (Parekh 117). It is during the process of juggling two cultures that Blanquita herself gets de-identified.

Blanquita’s constant short term relationships unveil the fragile American social fabric that she is unable to seep into. Her failed attempts at adaptation lead to her alienation and degeneration. Her dejection peeps through her affirmation: “I should never have left Manila. Pappy was right. The East is East and the West is West and never the twain shall meet” (“Fighting for the Rebound” 80).

T.S. Eliot believes that family is a proper channel for the propagation of culture. “But by far the most important channel of transmission of culture remains the family: and when family life fails to play its part, we must expect our culture to deteriorate” (43). It is this family oriented culture that Blanquita fails to observe in the American society. She is unable to understand the American institution of marriage, because for her, live-in relation and sex seems the ephemeral bond between young couples in the West. Hence rejection of marriage leads to negation of a family system; and the absence of family would mean a society without any cultural upbringing. Blanquita’s own cultural moorings do not allow her to
adopt the deteriorated cultural values prevalent in the American society.

Witnessing her relation with Griff following a similar track, she complains “Not just you Griff . . . you’re all emotional cripples. All you Americans. You just worry about your own messy little relationships. You don’t care how much you hurt the world” (“Fighting for the Rebound” 85). Therefore, Blanquita does not succumb to the emotionless, spiritless, and bland practicality of the American culture and continues to remain an outsider. Her search for true love in America is full of pain and anguish and leads to her cultural alienation.

Blanquita’s nostalgic anchoring subjects her to a position that is “caught between the promise of America and old world dutifulness” (Mukherjee, *Jasmine* 240). This position is full of traumatic experiences and estrangement that further reinforce the meaning of home, more acutely than ever, on the émigré. Home then begins to symbolise everything left behind—nationality, identity, and culture.

Being a second generation immigrant, Jhumpa Lahiri writes with a sensibility about her family’s ethnic heritage and the lived experiences of South Asian immigrants in the United States. An Indian by ancestry, British by birth and American by immigration, Lahiri describes her failure of belonging at a press conference in Calcutta in January 2001: “No country is my motherland. I always find myself in exile whichever country I travel to, that’s why I was
tempted to write something about those living their lives in exile” (Jawaid). Marginality, alienation and nostalgia are some of the leitmotifs in her works. Through her characters she explores the multi-dimensional anxieties of émigré life.

Ashima is one such character in The Namesake, who acts as a binding force in holding up her traditional Indian values amidst the materialistic realities of American life. A strong parallel can be drawn between the characters of Ashima and Nina (the protagonist of Manju Kapur’s The Immigrant), who befit the role of:

The immigrant who comes as a wife has a more difficult time. If work exists for her, it is in the future, and after much finding of feet. At present all she is, is a wife and a wife is alone for many, many hours. There will come a day when even books are powerless to distract. When the house and its conveniences can no longer completely charm or compensate. Then she realises she is an immigrant for life. (Kapur 124)

Both Ashima and Nina accompany their husbands to the new world, with the fear of losing their Indian cultural values and the pangs caused by a sense of isolation from both the local society and their own family.

Ashima is one of those expatriates who “continue to relate personally or vicariously to the homeland in one way or another, and their ethno-communal consciousness and solidarity are importantly
defined by the existence of such a relationship” (Safran 85). The Desh magazine that “she’d brought to read on her plane ride to Boston and still cannot bring herself to throw away” (NS 6), is an emblem of comfort for Ashima amidst the emotional upheaval. Throughout her journey from Calcutta to Cambridge, Massachusetts and nearly thirty years stay in America, her most traumatic experience of isolation is the birth of her son Gogol. The whole episode projects her intense yearning to cling to the traditional conventions of her homeland and an equally profound twinge she feels at her failure to do so in an alien land.

It’s not so much the pain, which she knows, somehow, she will survive. It’s the consequences: motherhood in a foreign land. . . . That it was happening so far from home, unmonitored and unobserved by those she loved, had made it more miraculous still. But she is terrified to raise a child in a country where she is related to no one, where she knows so little, where life seems so tentative and spare. (NS 6)

Ashima’s nostalgic spectres follow her eight thousand miles away to Cambridge and she says to her husband Ashoke, “I’m saying I don’t want to raise Gogol alone in this country. It’s not right. I want to go back” (NS 33).
In order to overcome the spatial, cultural and emotional vacuum in her life, Ashima goes to Calcutta for a six weeks’ trip, only to be distressed further. She feels:

    being a foreigner, Ashima is beginning to realize, is a sort of lifelong pregnancy—a perpetual wait, a constant burden, a continuous feeling out of sorts. It is an ongoing responsibility, a parenthesis in what had once been ordinary life, only to discover that the previous life had vanished, replaced by something more complicated and demanding. Like pregnancy, being a foreigner, Ashima believes, is something that elicits the same curiosity from strangers, the same combination of pity and respect. (NS 49-50)

Ashima remains immune to any impact of America’s multicultural milieu. Instead she clings to her old-world sentimentality and is always reminded of her deceased parents’ words: “not to eat beef or wear skirts or cut off her hair or forget her family” (NS 37).

    As immigrants fly across oceans they shed their old clothing, because clothes maketh the man, and new ones help ease the transition. Men’s clothing has less international variation; the change is not so drastic. But those women who are not used to wearing western clothes find themselves in a dilemma. If they focus on integration,
conversion, and conformity they have to sacrifice habit, style and self-perception. The choice is hard. . . . (Kapur 152)

Ashima, being an expatriate chooses to stick to her traditional Bengali way of dressing, because any transition in clothing would imply the disintegration of her ‘self’.

Tinker raises a question: “do the Asians [Indians] create their own difficulties by their own way of life and by remaining separate from the host society; or do their troubles arise from excess of chauvinism or racism in the country of their adoption?” (138). Ashima seems to be a victim of both conditions as she is neither ‘accepting’ nor ‘accepted’. By celebrating Gogol’s annaprasan (consumption of solid food ceremony), sending him to Bengali language and culture lessons, going to Kathakali dance performance or a sitar recital and visiting Calcutta regularly, Ashima wants to make home (Calcutta) a marker in her expatriate experience in America. This helps her calm the pain of exile that constantly haunts her and makes her a sojourner in America.

At the age of forty-eight, after her husband’s death, Ashima’s alienation intensifies beyond her tolerance and she decides to shuttle between two worlds–six months in India and six in America.

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. She feels both impatience and indifference for all the days she still must live . . . for thirty three years she missed her life in India. Now she will miss her job at the library, the women with whom she’s worked. . . . She will miss the country in which she had grown to know and love her husband. Though his ashes have been scattered into the Ganges, it is here, in this house and this town that he will continue to dwell in her mind. (NS 278-79)

The sense of this dual loss and dual alienation torments Ashima, and “draws [our] attention to the true meaning of her name, i.e., borderlessness or homelessness despite having a home” (Sah 156). “True to the meaning of her name, she will be without borders, without a home of her own, a resident everywhere and nowhere” (NS 276).

Mukherjee observes in an essay entitled “Immigrant Writing: Give Us Your Maximalist”:

I was a psychological expatriate, though a naturalized Canadian, for fifteen years, simply because Canada is a country officially hostile to the concept of assimilation (It proclaims the virtue of its multicultural policy). Perceiving myself to be in a comfortable but unwelcoming
These ‘emblems of difference’ define the restrictive and self-defining attitude in the expatriates that further leads to their ghetto existence. Ghettoization helps them to belong to their ethnicity without any temporal or spatial return. Like Rohinton Mistry, such expatriates try to locate the ‘self’ in a sense of community. In the words of Naipaul: dislocation “developed something they [the displaced subjects] would never have known in India, a sense of belonging to an Indian [ethnic] community” (*India: A Million Mutinies* 7). Therefore, displacement of these expatriates invokes in them the trauma of loss, exclusion and dislocation which they try to recover by forming a ghetto with other diasporic subjects who belong to a similar race, class, religion, language and origin. The cultural identification, therefore leads them to “constructions of the ‘we’” (Brah 184) against the dominant other.

Hence, we witness the ‘homing desire’ taking the shape of a group identity within the adopted land. This helps the expatriates to strike a balance between the past and the present by being more resilient and flexible and without negating the realities of the ‘self’ as well as the ‘others’. The various diasporic women, discussed in this chapter, who take shelter in a ghetto existence are Pat in “Scholar and Gypsy” (a story in Anita Desai’s collection *Games at Twilight*), Padma in Bharati Mukherjee’s *Desirable Daughters* and Mrs. Sen in the story “Mrs. Sen” (from Jhumpa Lahiri’s collection *Interpreter of Maladies*).
“Scholar and Gypsy”, the last story of Anita Desai’s Collection *Games at Twilight* magnifies the clash of cultures through the diasporic experiences of David, the scholar and his wife Pat, the gypsy. The “intercultural osmosis and global mélange” (Pieterse 71) seem to have contrary impacts on David and Pat. Pat is afflicted with a feeling of cultural alienation because the absence of the motherland becomes a constant reminder and continues to colour her perception. Barry Lopez comments: “I would say a sense of place is also critical to the development of a sense of morality and of human identity” (qtd. in Jain 102). The natural surroundings affect the immigrants’ sense of identity. A change in climate, landscape, surroundings and social convention threaten the newcomers’ identity. Their struggle to negotiate a new territory and culture culminates in the fragmentation of ethnic identity and leads to their psychic alienation.

Her first day in Bombay wilted her. If she stepped out of the air-conditioned hotel room, she dropped, her head hung, her eyes glazed, she felt faint. Once she was back in it, she fell across her bed as though she had been struck by calamity, was extinguished, and could barely bring herself to believe that she had, after all, survived.

Sweating, it seemed to her the life, energy, hope were all seeping out of her, flowing down a drain, gurgling ironically. . . . In an unfamiliar land she felt crushed rather than revived. (“Scholar and Gypsy” 109)
The heat, the people, the sights, the congestion, the poverty, disease and filth of Delhi and Bombay remind her of the sophistication of America, and buffer her nostalgic craving for the home she left to accompany her husband David to India. “Back on her bed, she wept into her pillow for the lost home, for apple trees and cows, for red barns and swallows, for ice-cream sodas and drive-in movies, all that was innocent and sweet and lost, lost, lost” (“Scholar and Gypsy” 113). The alienation she experiences in Bombay and Delhi, brings about her transition from “an American globe-totter” into “a corpse” (“Scholar and Gypsy” 109), whose “eyes had been so blue, now they were fading, as if the memory, the feel of apple trees and apples were fading from her. He [David] panicked” (“Scholar and Gypsy” 115). “As a representation of the real the image is always partially phantasmic” (Phelan 1). It is these ghosts of visual images and memory that continue to haunt the displaced psyche of Pat and act as a powerful presence in her nostalgic vision of an ideal home.

Pat’s story is a narrative of dislocation and self-recovery. This recovery is attained by Pat once she goes to Manali, a place that comes closest to Pat’s yearning for America. A similarity can be drawn in Pat and Willy Chandran, the protagonist of V.S. Naipaul’s Half a Life (2001) because both yearn to take the odyssey to find a place that provides sustenance to their individuality and discover “another self in him [them], in a silent space where all his [their] external life was muffled” (Naipaul, Half a Life 133).
This new self is discovered by Pat in Manali where she prefers to join the macro culture of hippies in search of Nirvana. In them she views the similarity of race, ethnicity, language and outlook. Her ghetto existence in Manali with the hippies comes as a relief from the isolation and estrangement. She confesses to David that coming to Manali and living among the other foreigners like her is “like escaping from all Hindu horrors–its like coming out into the open and breathing naturally again without fear” (“Scholar and Gypsy” 128). Her inter-civilizational alliance with other European and American hippies helps her to revitalise her cultural identity in the adopted land.

Manali, with its similarity of environment and hippy culture, “led Pat so quickly to know it and feel it as home. It presented no difficulty, as other Indian towns of her acquaintance had, it was innocent and open and if it did not clamorously and cravenly invite, it did not shut its doors either–it had none to shut” (“Scholar and Gypsy” 123). Therefore, Pat leaves behind the trauma of solitude and willingly syncretises her identity through ghettoization.

Padma, another ghetto dweller in Bharati Mukherjee’s Desirable Daughters carves out a niche for herself by associating with the Bengali American community and transplanting her ethnic identity amidst the multicultural American society. Through memory she merges the kaleidoscopic images of the past and revives her fragile self in an unstable present. For her, history is the “real place” (Lacan 238) that cannot be evicted.
Padma, a Bengali Brahmin from Calcutta, is the eldest of the three sisters. She is married to Harish Mehta, a Punjabi businessman previously married and with grown children.

She lives in Upper Montclair, New Jersey, in a nice part of a nice town with many Indians in the neighbourhood. She and Harish socialize almost exclusively with Indians. In the nearly twenty five years that she has been in the U.S., she has become more Indian than when she left Calcutta. She is a “multicultural performing artist” for local schools and community centres, staging Indian mythological evenings, with readings, slide shows, recitations and musical accompaniment. (*DD* 94)

Padma is one of those expatriates who adhere to the diasporic community by “Re-orienting their life in a new socio-political environment they exude a cultural resilience and keep acquaintance with one another on family get-togethers, regardless of each other’s qualifications, professional engagements and economic status” (*Nayak* 140).

Padma’s constant association with the fellow community is an attempt at deluding the “controversies of self” (*Lee* 2) that arise from the simultaneous presence of past and present in the cross-cultural scenario. In order to escape the cultural inertia, Padma, clings to her ethnicity as far as her domestic and professional life is concerned. She “had started working for a major tycoon with big plans for starting a
T.V. Show. It would be a vernacular soap opera for North American thirty something Bengalis, full of the vicissitudes of American life from an Indian perspective” (DD 175). The show is about the emigrant behaviour—about women dealing with in-laws, stopping their daughters from dating and struggling to maintain a healthy home, life and respect for the ethnic culture and tradition. Padma’s professional effort is also inclined towards the affirmation and propagation of her ethnicity. “She is on the invitation list when Indian dignitaries arrive for U.N. functions or Hindi film stars give a New York concert, and I’ve sometimes spotted her among the glitterati on the Indo-American television channels that play in California” (DD 94).

Deborah Mason states that in Desirable Daughters Mukherjee “expands her themes . . . into the deeper realms of spirit and the sustenance of local gods in a time of global depersonalization” (117). Padma’s youngest sister Tara, who depicts assimilatory traits of an immigrant is condemned by Padma for going through a divorce. Padma tries to inculcate the Bengali traditions and values in Tara who, according to Padma, seems to have “become ‘American’, meaning self-engrossed” (DD 134). Padma’s “clinging to a version of India, and to Indian ways and Indian friends, Indian clothes and food and a ‘charming’ accent” (DD 134) are evidences of an impenetrable shell that she has built around herself preventing any foreign influence from impinging upon her ethnic sanctity. She teaches Tara that, “Change is corruption. . . . Take what America can give but don’t let it
tarnish you in any way” (DD 134). Justifying her role of a woman as a propagator of nationality and tradition, “She [Padma] had chosen to echo our mother and our aunts–things are never perfect in marriage, a woman must be prepared to accept less than perfection in this lifetime–and to model herself on Sita, Savitri and Behula, the virtuous wives of Hindu myths” (DD 134).

For Padma, assimilation is a taboo that mars one’s reputation among the diasporic community. The ghetto begins to consider a migrant an outcast, if she fails to take pride in her roots. Padma, too, is outraged at Tara’s self-centred Americanisation, and cries out: “May be you’re shameless enough out there in California with all your money and your American friends not to care about your reputation, but it’s all I have” (DD 197). The ethnic hub that Padma has created and preserved in the adopted land, helps her to suppress the feelings of solitude created by nostalgic lingering in the past. Hence, Padma’s character in Desirable Daughters, sheds light on the manners in which a state of psychological composure could be acquired by Indian women uprooted from India to the West. . . . It ultimately comes, she [Bharati Mukherjee] suggests, not by attempting to ape Western moves, behaviour or attitudes, . . . but from accepting one’s own cultural upbringing and cultural identity with dignity and allowing time to act as a
natural catalyst in engineering a transnational
amalgamation. (Almeida 86)

In an interview with Elizabeth Farnsworth, Jhumpa Lahiri
makes the following confession about her diasporic writing:

I think that, in part, it’s a reflection of what I observed my
parents experiencing and their friends, their circle of
fellow Indian immigrant friends. It’s also, in part, drawn
from my own experiences and a sense of . . . I always say
that I feel that I’ve inherited a sense of that loss from my
parents because it was so palpable all the time while I
was growing up, the sense of what my parents had
sacrificed in moving to the United States, and in so many
ways, and yet at the same time, remaining here and
building a life here and all that that entailed. (Farnsworth)

Therefore, being a second generation immigrant, Jhumpa Lahiri has
witnessed the traits of ghetto existence in her parents, who remained
 glued to their ‘circle of fellow Indian immigrant friends’. She tries to
portray such tendency of community clinging in some of her diasporic
writings.

This chapter is an attempt at foregrounding those character
portrayals by Lahiri whose ‘sense of loss’ magnifies their nativity and
finally pushes them into a ghetto that symbolises the nation of their
minds. One such emigrant in America who lives within this ‘little
India’ she has created in her mind and in her house is Mrs. Sen in the
story “Mrs. Sen” from Jhumpa Lahiri’s collection *Interpreter of Maladies: Stories of Bengal, Boston and Beyond*.

Mrs. Sen is the wife of a Bengali professor who teaches Mathematics at a University in America. She works as a baby sitter for eleven year old Eliot, who is an American. The resurgence of retaining one’s cultural and ethnic identity magnifies Mrs. Sen’s pain of exile, which she feels “is considerably more than being in another country. It is to live with myself knowing my estrangement. It is to know that I do not belong here” (Itwaru 202).

She retains her Indian attire, “a shimmering white sari pattered with orange paisleys” (“Mrs. Sen” 112), and puts vermilion on her forehead. For her “home meant India, not the apartment where she sat chopping vegetables” (“Mrs. Sen” 116). Her adherence to the patterns of home and refusal to integrate with the adopted culture, lead to her isolation and she remains an alien, forever on the periphery. The sharp contrast between the Indian sense of community and the American individualism, make her crave for the lost home, as for her “Everything is there [in India]” (“Mrs. Sen” 112). The social bonding in India is a primary condition that reminds and magnifies Mrs. Sen’s sense of loneliness that looms large in the materialistic American society. “At home that is all you have to do. Not everyone has a telephone. But just raise your voice a bit, or express grief or joy of any kind, and one whole neighbourhood and half of another has come to share the news, to help with arrangements” (“Mrs. Sen” 112).
For her the sleepless nights in Calcutta were more peaceful and soothing when compared to the painful peace and solitude of exile in America “It is impossible to fall asleep those nights, listening to their chatter’. . . . ‘Here, in this place where Mr. Sen has brought me, I cannot sometimes sleep in so much silence’” (“Mrs. Sen” 115).

Since the community feeling is absent in America, and Mrs. Sen stays cooped in her apartment, the only scope of communal sharing she finds is with Eliot, who becomes her confidant. Though an American, his mute admiration and acceptance of Mrs. Sen’s traditional ways makes him her ‘pseudo native’ (or mock companion) who considers Mrs. Sen’s apartment as a ‘little India’, where she has kept her traditions and past alive. Eliot begins to view his own mother as an outsider within the Indian territory of Mrs. Sen:

It was his mother, Eliot thought, in her cuffed, beige shorts and her rope-soled shoes who looked odd. Her cropped hair, a shade similar to her shorts, seemed too lank and sensible, and in that room where all things were so carefully covered, her shaved knees and thighs too exposed. (“Mrs. Sen” 112-113)

With Eliot, Mrs. Sen forms a little ghetto, sharing with him the Indian food, memories, value systems and above all every exotic detail of the past she has so dexterously preserved within and around herself. Mrs. Sen is one of the émigrés who carry the memories of their past as their prized “possessions and belongings to new places” (McLeod 211).
“It is arguable that one is more easily an Indian abroad than in India” (Choubey). Mrs. Sen is one such bewildered and alienated expatriate who begins to lay so much emphasis on her nationality that even the traditional food and letters from home act as important Indian emblems that help Mrs. Sen to escape from the discomforts of an alien culture. She seeks recluse in them as letters break the silence and alienation, and food brings back the aroma of the lost world.

Mrs. Sen treasures and retains her Indianness even in the minutest details of her culinary efforts: “she chopped things, seated on newspapers on the living room floor. Instead of a knife she used a blade. . . . The blade was hinged at one end to a narrow wooden base” (“Mrs. Sen” 114). The subtlety with which Mrs. Sen tries to preserve and reconstruct the past within and around herself in suggestive that “home is not only a residential space but also a psychic construct that fashions the identity and affiliation of the self” (Narzary 62).

The nostalgia may take on the darker face of schizophrenic and claustrophobic tendencies, where the emigrant’s feeling of loss passes through various shades of nostalgia and finally culminates into schizophrenia or claustrophobia. Such dislocated psyche gets crushed between ‘being’ and ‘becoming’. Keeping such shattered identities in mind, B. R. Nagpal asserts:

The clogged fears and oppositional stages can either be brushed aside or the claustrophobic world of subservience may prove dismal so that a sense of fragmentation,
paranoia turns out to be hammerings towards a sense of self-oblivion. Thus, when there is an existentialist sense of personality definition, the contradiction is one of an acute sense of depersonalization. (88)

The nostalgic clinging in some cases becomes so severe that it begins to deconstruct the identity in the process of transplantation. Such migrants “retreat from such questions [questions of change and adaptation] behind the walls of old culture they have both brought along and left behind” (Rushdie, Step 415). Such nostalgic diasporic subjects never break out of the shell of expatriation. They feel sharp stings of ‘otherness’ and carry the scars of trauma all their lives. For them the anxieties of homelessness and the impossibility of going back are perennial.

The various displaced women who perfectly delineate this category are Sophie in Anita Desai’s Journey to Ithaca; Dimple Dasgupta in Bharati Mukherjee’s Wife; Boori Ma in “A Real Durwan” and Shobha in “A Temporary Matter” (stories in Jhumpa Lahiri’s collection Interpreter of Maladies). They are entrapped in an impasse between the feminist desire to be assertive and the ethnic need to be submissive. Unable to continue this tight rope walk between the two juxtaposed worlds, they end up in a psychological claustrophobia leading to destructive tendencies.

“It is from those who have suffered the sentence of history—subjugation, domination, diaspora, displacement—that we learn our
most enduring lessons” (Bhabha 172). The diasporic existence of the female characters discussed in this chapter brings forth the trauma experienced by the emigrants that leads to the fragmentation, almost akin to schizophrenia, of the displaced psyche. By applying Freudian psychoanalysis, that focuses on the mutual impact of trauma and memory on each other, this chapter makes an in-depth analysis on the trauma of memory, in case of cross-cultural displacements, that further lead to the claustrophobic and schizophrenic tendencies.

Sophie in Anita Desai’s Journey to Ithaca is one such victim of trauma of memory, whose memory triggers her alienation to an extent of claustrophobic tendencies. Her journey to India, to Mother’s ashram, constantly rips her of her self, her past and her home. Once she begins to feel claustrophobic, she revolts by leaving Matteo and his spiritual quest, and goes back to the land of her origin.

Juliet Mitchell observes that trauma “must create a breach in a protective covering of such severity that it cannot be coped with by the usual mechanisms by which we deal with pain or loss. . . . In trauma we are untimely ripped” (121). It is this severity of claustrophobia, triggered by the trauma of memory that forces Sophie to return to her roots. Her return to Italy slightly soothes her traumatic memory and, hence, releases her psyche that once remained fettered by the chains of alienation.

Sophie accompanies Matteo in his search “to find India, to understand India, and the mystery that is at the heart of India” (JI
54). But for Sophie it is just another adventure to enjoy the exotic beauties and delights of India. During the journey, the spectres of memory continue to traumatize Sophie, and lead to her alienation from Matteo, Mother and everything unfamiliar around her. Said observes that: “just beyond the frontiers between ‘us’ and the ‘outsiders’ is the perilous territory of not-belonging: this is to where in a primitive time people were banished, and where in the modern era, immense aggregates of humanity loiter as refugees and displaced persons” (Said 176-177). Sophie is one such displaced person who is lost within this ‘perilous territory of not-belonging’.

At the ashram in Bihar, she feels suffocated and constantly complains against the unsavoury atmosphere of the ashram. Vexed by her sense of isolation and the dilemma of belonging, she joins the hippies in Goa. But her tryst with marijuana is soon over because the claustrophobic sense of agony and shame traumatises her. “Sometimes she cried herself . . . and seemed to be lying in a spreading pool of her own excrement . . . quite shamefully” (JI 56).

Her decision to go back to Matteo at Mother’s ashram in the Himalayas, comes as no relief because she regards Mother to be “a monster spider who had spun this web to catch these silly flies” (JI 127). Like the Sanyasis, Matteo begins to neglect his familial responsibilities considering them to be “a nightmare world of physicality” (JI 102). Threatened by the dampening influences of Mother and Indianness, on their shattered selves, Sophie cajoles
Matteo with the possibilities of resuscitation of family and return to their origins. She questions Matteo: “Couldn’t we stay in our own country? To die there?” (JI 57). Sometimes she even weeps like a child, saying, “I want to go home” (JI 89). Feeling constrained and helpless like “a beast in a cage” (JI 79), she begins to yearn for the freedom and freshness of home.

Sophie declines any desire to assimilate because “to adapt oneself is to allow the material environment to penetrate into us, to drive us out of ourselves” (Chaitanya 88). With a European core in her heart and a desire to protect the ‘us’, she protests against anything Indian. But after the birth of her children, Giacomo and Isabel, her revolt takes the form of freedom and individuality. With an urge of a woman to propagate her ethnicity and tradition to her children, she rebels against the forced decision of Matteo, the social norms, and decides to go back to Italy to her parents in search of the identity she seems to have lost in the winding ways of the ashrams in India.

Her odyssey through India soon transforms into the collective memories of bitterness–frustration–trauma that continue to haunt her even after her return to Italy. Journey to Ithaca, referring to the journey towards home has a contrary impact on Sophie who after undertaking the journey finds herself homeless even in Italy. The trauma of memory that haunts her during her journey continues to impinge upon her psyche, though with lesser intensity, even after returning to her origins.
Bharati Mukherjee’s novel *Wife* is a true depiction of Caruth’s assumption that, “Trauma is deeply tied to our own historical realities” (Caruth 12). The novel delineates Dimple Dasgupta’s migration from Calcutta to New York, and her consequent schizophrenic tendencies resulting from trauma of memory. Dimple’s nostalgic yearnings and reveries turn the eccentricity, confusion and violence inside out and she ends up murdering her husband in cold blood.

Dimple marries Amit Basu, a Consultant Engineer, who has applied for immigration to Canada and U.S. Superficially, Dimple eagerly anticipates her move to a foreign land, but deep within “Thoughts of living in Africa or North America terrified her” (*Wife* 17). From the beginning, Dimple is portrayed as a rebel, who does not conform to the realities of life and continues to nourish her romantic yearnings. Soon she realizes that Amit is not the ideal man she imagined for her husband. The killing of the mice is a manifestation of the long smouldering violence inside her that results from the isolation she begins to feel after her marriage. When in India, she yearns for a foreign land and does “not want to carry any relics from her old life” (*Wife* 42). Her act of self-abortion is also in sync with her desire to erase any evidence of her past and to “get rid of, . . . whatever it was that blocked her tubes and pipes” (*Wife* 31). Keeping the rebellious nature of Dimple in mind, her act of abortion can be viewed as liberation from the traditional role of womanhood of bearing
and rearing children. “For an Indian wife, childlessness is a disaster, pregnancy the achievement that seals her status. To overturn such ingrained values would involve a major emotional upheaval” (Klass 88). This upheaval results from the claustrophobic tendencies of Dimple when she confronts the traumatic realities of life which are in complete contradiction to her imagination and dreams. “She was bitter that marriage had betrayed her, had not provided all the glittery things she had imagined . . .” (Wife 102).

Once in New York, Dimple and Amit become a part of the ghetto created by the Indian community around them. The very first introduction of America where “talking about murder is like talking about the weather” (Wife 161), further adds to Dimple’s alienation, which she has begun to experience in India itself, after her marriage. Amit’s initial unemployment in America, her confusion with the names of places like Nebraska and Nevada, Ohio and Iowa, her deficiencies in English language, her failed attempts to settle her scores with America, her fear of policemen, of electronic gadgets and appliances, her denial to wear Western clothes that would make her look like a Puerto Rican, all amount to the traditional attachment that has created the lacunae in her present. She is gripped with a sense of nostalgia and she questions herself: “how could she live in a country . . . where every other woman was a stranger, where she felt different, ignorant, exposed to ridicule in the elevator? (Wife 112). Dimple’s disgust with America, accentuated even by minute things, is explained
by Linda Sandler as her failure to re-root herself. “Dimple emigrates to the electronic age with her traditional values almost intact, only partly modified by the pop culture of modern Calcutta, she is unable to make the transition from Before to After and chooses violence as a ‘problem-solving device’” . . . (75).

Dimple’s failure at rejection as well as assimilation leads to her psychological disaster.

She had expected pain when she had come to America, had told herself that pain was part of any new beginning, and in the sweet structure of that new life had allotted pain a special place. But she had not expected her mind to be strained like this, beyond endurance. She had not anticipated inertia, exhaustion, endless indecisiveness.

(Wife 115)

The clash in Dimple’s feminist and American desire to be assertive and outgoing and traditional requirement to be submissive, leads to her emotional cracking-up, and she begins to depict schizophrenic traits:

She was furious, desperate; she felt sick. It was as if some force was impelling her towards disaster, some monster had overtaken her body, a creature with serpentine curls and heaving bosom that would erupt indiscreetly through one of Dimple’s orifices, leaving her, Dimple Basu,
splattered like a bug on the living-room wall and rug.

(Wife 156)

Considering her life to be “slow, full of miscalculations” (Wife 178), she lets the nostalgic memory traumatisé her to such an extent that, in the wake of claustrophobia, she begins to have suicidal thoughts. “Her own body seemed curiously alien to her, filled with hate, malice, an insane desire to hurt, yet weightless, almost airborne” (Wife 117). But the trauma of memory soon yields her claustrophobia to schizophrenia and the violence inside begins to surface, and she starts contemplating the murder of her husband. She finally kills Amit, and by stabbing him seven times, she seems to free herself from the bond of marriage, an emblem of her traditional clinging to the past.

In her two stories—“A Real Durwan” and “A Temporary Matter” (from the collection *Interpreter of Maladies*)—Jhumpa Lahiri explores and evaluates the trauma experienced due to the loss of homeland. The stories bring forth the mourning characters whose trauma is associated with the notions of “loss” (Freud’s notion) and the notion of “presence” (Derrida’s notion). Like trauma, “Mourning is regularly the reaction to the loss of a loved person, or the loss of some abstraction which has taken place, such as one’s country, liberty, an ideal and so on” (Freud 251-252). Therefore, memory of the past or the spectres of absence give rise to trauma or mourning which leads to the alienation of the displaced subjects.
Boori Ma in “A Real Durwan” is a refugee deported to Calcutta after the Partition. She is a sweeper of the stair well of a “flat building” in Calcutta. She has made her home under the letter boxes of the building. Poverty, age and trauma of memory have turned her into a meager being who “looked almost as narrow from the front as she did from the side” (“Real Durwan” 70). She claims of a rich past, having belonged to an affluent zamindaar family of East Pakistan (now Bangladesh), but the traumatic events of Partition have reduced her to the present pitiable creature in Calcutta, at the mercy of ‘other’ inhabitants of the building. Her experience of exile has left her stranded and estranged with the claustrophobic trauma of memories and she continues to mourn the riches of her past when compared to the insufficiency of the present. She tries to escape from the hardships of the present by reminiscing about the past life. Boori Ma “has no home but in memory” (Ghosh 194).

She boasts of “four daughters, a two story brick house, a rose wood almari, and a number of coffer boxes,” and the food at her third daughter’s wedding—“the rice was cooked in rose water . . . mustard prawns . . . fish” (“Real Durwan” 71). “She probably constructs tales as a way of mourning the loss of her family” (“Real Durwan” 72), and the loss of her past. The memories of her past represent the pain of partition, the trauma it caused and the relations it severed. Therefore, Boori Ma’s exaggerated stories of her past are a momentary release from the traumatic and claustrophobic existence in the present. She is
like the migrants who “are constantly negotiating their positions between nations, between ‘where they’re from’, ‘where they are at’ and ‘where they are going’, and, in the process creating identities that serve as momentary points of suture that stabilize the flow” (Kennedy and Roudometof 114).

But the stories of Boori Ma’s abundant past have a contrary impact on the flat dwellers who blame her for collaborating with the thieves who stole Mr. Dalal’s wash basin. “So the residents tossed her bucket and rags, her basket and reed broom down the stair well, past the letter boxes, through the collapsible gate, and into the alley. Then they tossed out Boori Ma” (“Real Durwan” 82). Boori Ma’s rejection by the residents of the building highlights her alienation as she once again ends up being a refugee–homeless and displaced–who painfully continues to be at odds with changed times.

“A Temporary Matter” is a story about Shoba’s attempt at temporal erasing of the memory to escape the tortures and trauma of isolation and estrangement. The story, on the surface, may appear to be a claustrophobic tale of a broken marriage but deep below, it is about maladjustment of migrants grappling with the sense of ‘belonging’.

The clash of mind between Shoba and Shukumar has a symbolic significance, as it obliquely conveys the lack of communication between the migrant and the host society. Physical distancing of Shoba and Shukumar symbolises their mental
distancing from their American life. Shoba’s removal of things from the apartment, after the birth of her still born child, reveals her attempt to get rid of the pain of memory that hints at both the pain of loosing a child and the pain of loosing her origins.

the first thing she did when she walked into the house was pick out objects of their and toss them into a pile in the hallway: books from the shelves, plants from the window sills, painting from walls, photos from tables, pots and pans that hung from the hooks over the stove.

(“Temporary Matter” 16)

This act of Shoba “is a painful remembering, a putting together of the dismembered past to make sense of the trauma of the present” (Gandhi 9).

Though, on the surface, Shoba looks like a well acclimatised American, but subconsciously, the rootlessness and estrangement largely occupies her life and makes her feel claustrophobic and incapable of communicating with her husband. India means a lot to Shoba but to Shukumar it comes alive only from his history textbooks. She feels that her husband is more of an American as:

It wasn’t until after his father died in his last year of college, that the country (India) began to interest him and he studied its history from course books as if it were any other subject. He wished now he had his own childhood story of India. (“Temporary Matter” 12)
Shoba’s own traditional clinging is of a greater intensity than her husband.

Being traditional, she doesn’t possess the bold and blunt American attitude of making confessions. Therefore, it is only under the shield of darkness that she gathers courage and indulges in the game of confessing secrets to one another. On the fifth and the last day of the power cut she declares her decision to leave Shukumar as she is not able to cope with the suffocating atmosphere of her house that has resulted from the traumatic memories of a lost husband, a lost child, and a lost nation; and her failure to strike a balance between the binaries. For Shoba “home becomes primarily a mental construct built from the incomplete odds and ends of memory that survive from the past. It exists in a fractured, discontinuous relationship with the present” (McLeod 211).

To conclude, the postmodern world of Anita Desai, Bharati Mukherjee and Jhumpa Lahiri’s fictions depicts the expatriates who are engulfed by the pain of nostalgia. The void created in their lives continues to engulf them and leaves them stranded between the binaries of us/them, self/other, inside/outside and centre/periphery.
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