Chapter IV

JHUMPA LAHIRI

(July 11, 1967 – age 48)
I. Jhumpa Lahiri: Life and Works

Jhumpa Lahiri is one of the most significant writers of the Indian diaspora in the present time. She was born to Bengali parents in July 1967, in London. Later with her family’s move to Rhode Island, she began life in the US. She grew up in the background of traditional Bengali culture. From childhood, she often accompanied her parents back to India – particularly to Calcutta (now known as Kolkata). Her father worked as a librarian and her mother remained a traditional Indian wife, maintaining the customs. Lahiri began writing at the age of seven, co-writing stories with her best friend in primary school. She abandoned writing fiction as an adolescent, and lacked the confidence to resume the pursuit during her university years. While employed as a researcher, she found the stimulus to resume writing fiction and, after achieving a Ph.D. in Renaissance Studies at Boston University, turned once again to creative writing. In 2001, Lahiri married Alberto Vourvoulias Bush, a journalist who was then Deputy Editor of Time Latin America, and who is now senior editor of Time Latin America. At present, she lives in Rome, Italy with her husband and their two children, Octavio and Noor.

With a string of degrees behind her, she decided that the life of a scholar was less interesting than that of a fiction writer, and began seriously submitting stories for publication. Lahiri’s fiction has appeared in The New Yorker, Agni, Epoch, The Louisville Review, Harvard Review, Story Quarterly, and elsewhere. After being published in prestigious magazines such as The New Yorker, Lahiri was awarded the highest literary honour in the United States, the Pulitzer Prize for Literature in 2000 for her debut short story collection Interpreter of Maladies. In addition to the Pulitzer Prize for fiction, she has received the PEN/Hemingway Award, the O. Henry Award, a Transatlantic Review award from the Henfield Foundation in 1993, and a fiction prize from The Louisville Review in 1997. She was also a finalist for the Los Angeles Times Book Prize and was named one of the “20 best young fiction writers in America” in The New Yorker’s summer 1999 fiction issue.

In 2003, she wrote the novel The Namesake, which spent several weeks on New York Times bestseller list and which was made into a movie in 2006 directed by Mira Nair, starring Irrfan Khan, Taboo and Kal Penn in the leading roles. In 2008, a second collection of short stories, Unaccustomed Earth, was published. Recently her
second novel, *The Lowland*, is published which has been shortlisted among the finalists for the Booker Prize in 2013.

In an interview, when she was asked what distinguishes the experiences of Indian immigrants to the United States from those of their American-born children, she answers:

“The question of identity is always a difficult one, but especially for those who are culturally displaced, as immigrants are, or those who grow up in two worlds simultaneously, as is the case for their children. The older I get, the more aware I am that I have somehow inherited a sense of exile from my parents, even though in many ways—superficial ones, largely—I am so much more American than they are. In fact, it is still very hard to think of myself as an American. For immigrants, the challenges of exile, the loneliness, the constant sense of alienation, the knowledge of and longing for a lost world, are more explicit and distressing than for their children. On the other hand, the problem for the children of immigrants, those with strong ties to their country of origin, is that they feel neither one thing nor the other. The feeling that there was no single place to which I fully belonged bothered me growing up. It bothers me less now.” (Lahiri 2008)

Jhumpa Lahiri, born to Bengali parents in London, brought up in the United States, married Alberto Vourvolias Bush, an American, and is now based in Rome, Italy. Her continental drift through England and the United States is similar to that of Anita Desai and Bharati Mukherjee. But what segregates her diasporic experience from theirs is that she is a second-generation immigrant whose dilemma has been analyzed by Jaiwanti Dimri as follows:

Expatriate experience is problematic for the second generation immigrants of the third world for specific reasons. Born and brought up on foreign soil expatriation for this neo-class immigrants hangs in the background as an imaginary reality. Free from the stigma of nostalgia and the popular symptoms of angst, loneliness, existential rootlessness or homelessness, their predicament is in many ways,
worse than that of their predecessors. Despite their assimilation and acculturation they cannot escape from being victimized and ostracized.

(Dimri 28)

Speaking about her combination of the locales (some of are in India and others are in America), she says,

“When I began writing fiction seriously, my first attempts, for some reason, were always set in Calcutta, which is a city I know quite well from repeated visits with my family. These trips to a vast, unruly, fascinating city so different from the small New England town where I was raised shaped my perceptions of the world and of people from a very early age. I learned that there was another side, a vastly different version to everything. I learned to observe things as an outsider, and yet I also knew that as different as Calcutta is from Rhode Island, I belonged there in some fundamental way, in ways I didn’t seem to belong in the United States. As I gained a bit more confidence, I began to set stories in the United States and wrote about situations closer to my own experiences. For me, that has been the greater challenge.”

(Lahiri 2008)

As a writer, belonging to this ‘neo-class of immigrants’, Lahiri has reached a new paradigm of bicultural experiences. Hence, her perception of cross-cultural experiences shows drastic shifts in her focus and concern regarding transnational identities and their cultural acclimatization. The entire oeuvre of Lahiri including– *Interpreter of Maladies: Stories of bengal, boston and beyond, The Namesake* and *Unaccustomed Earth* (a collection of short stories) is critically analyzed in this thesis to study the issues of bicultural ambivalence and identity faced by both the first as well as the second generation immigrants.

The experiences of diasporic women writers are clearly depicted through the words of Gloria Anzaldua:

We are . . . the people that don’t belong anywhere, not in the dominant world nor completely in our own respective cultures. Combined we cover so many oppressions . . . . Not all of us have the same
oppressions, but we empathize and identify with each other’s oppressions. We do not have the same ideology, nor do we derive similar solutions. Some of us are leftists, some of us practitioners of magic. Some of us are both. But these different affinities are not opposed to each other. (Moraga and Anzaldúa 128)

This epigraph by Anzaldúa projects the lived experiences of multicultural women writers and the theme of women’s marginalization in their cross-cultural fictions. Similarly, the diasporic and feminist stances depicted by these three women writers in their works, exemplify their own multicultural experiences. Through these works, they emphasize strategies of survival and co-existence in a multicultural environment.

The debut work of Lahiri, *Interpreter of Maladies*, includes nine stories which offer the reader a variety of experiences that are both familiar and unfamiliar. The collection concerns the Southeast Asia Indians, often Bengali, living either in India, or after transplantation, in the United States. All provide rich description of the details of Indian life, and of cultural values and customs. While the domestic routines, for example, Indian food and cooking provide an important backdrop in several stories, maybe unfamiliar to the readers, especially those of Americans, the style and the issues in Lahiri’s collection are highly accessible, absorbing and moving.

Most of the stories are written from a perspective that is between cultures. The characters are refugees but are negotiating a path in a country, in America, that seems to provide opportunities or places, as in *A Temporary Matter, The Third and Final Continent, Mrs. Sen’s, When Mr. Pirzada Came to Dine* and *This Blessed House*. Ties to the Asian sub-continent may be strong or weak, but they seem to be haunting. Living between cultures lends an extra layer of complexity to situations and relationships.

The first story in the collection, *A Temporary Matter*, is about a young couple whose marriage has reached a deadlock following the stillbirth. The couple receives a notice from the power company informing that their neighborhood will be without power each night for the next five days. The electricity cut-off, however, builds up some correction between the couple.
The story of *Mr. Pirzada Came to Dine* is of a Bengali family and a Bangladeshi, Mr. Pirzada. Lilia, the Indian-American girl, is emotionally touched by the kindness her parents show to Mr. Pirzada who fears the safety of his family back home amid civil war.

*Interpreter of Maladies* is about an Indian-American couple who has come to India with their three children. Their tour guide is also the interpreter of maladies of foreign patients in doctor’s office. In an intimate talk between Mrs. Das and the tour guide, she confesses that one of her two boys is the fruit of her husband’s friend. The tour guide, or the interpreter of maladies, puts her in a dilemma by asking: “Is it really pain you feel, Mrs. Das or is it guilt?” (IM 60)

In *Mrs. Sen’s*, Professor’s wife, Mrs. Sen, has to learn driving so that she can keep her job as a babysitter. This helps her improve in her new American life and kill time as her husband is always busy. Her job mirrors her fear, frustration, isolation, loneliness and homesickness.

The fifth story, *A Real Durwan*, is the story of Boori Ma, a sweeper of stairwell in an old building in Calcutta, who was deported there after partition. She recalls about her woes and sufferings she encountered ever since. In the end the residents throw Ma out after a theft suspicion.

*The Blessed House*, is the story of young Asian couple who have just started their married life in Connecticut. They encounter Christian paraphernalia left behind by their former house owner. Twinkle, the wife, is delighted on finding these objects, but Sanjeev is not too interested. The Christian paraphernalia is both the clash and reunion of the couple in the end.

*The Treatment of Bibi Halder* is about a rural Indian girl living in Calcutta. She is very naïve and believes that marriage is a panacea for all maladies. The story is about how people help her finding a husband and how she is finally cured.

The story *Sexy* is about an American-Indian girl, Miranda, who falls in love with a married Bengali man unaware of his status. She then tries to adapt Bengali culture, learn Bengali, eat Indian food, watch Indian movies and to the end she realizes ramification and uselessness of this relation.
And finally, *The Third and Final Continent* is the story of an Indian immigrant who reminisces her first few weeks in America, thirty years ago. He had arranged a marriage but since he had to come to America immediately after the marriage, he could not get acquainted with his wife. Meanwhile, he rents a room owned by an old widow. When his wife arrives in America, Mrs. Croft calls her a perfect lady. This comment evokes a sympathy and love in his mind for his wife.

These stories not only strike a chord with those who feel alienated and lonely in foreign land but also a chord to the appreciators of Indian culture. The nine stories in this collection all draw upon different aspects of the characters’ Indian background. Every character in the different stories is affected in some way or another by the weight of Indian culture. Three of the stories take place in India and six others involve the lives of Indian immigrants in the United States.

The title story, *Interpreter of Maladies*, gives us the image of American-born Indian family on vacation in India, strangers to their own culture and heritage. Mr. and Mrs. Das are so distant from their Indian heritage that they need a tour guide. In the title story Mrs. Das is shown in balance and in total adaptation with American life and so are her children. The way she is wearing and the way she is tasting and treating the food, like strangers, and the way she avoids touching the drinks in the fear of infection are the representative of degree of assimilation that is heavily weighted in favor of American style of life.

Other stories in this collection, such as *The Third and Final Continent*, or *When Mr. Pirzada came to Dine* present immigrant wives who seem to find a balance between Bengal and America. Mrs. Sen, although limping and very slow and has a long journey to take in the new land, finally settles and resembles those Indian-American women already in balance.

In *The Blessed House*, twinkle with great joy and excitement arranges the Christian symbols, as an American religious and cultural value, on the mantelshelf.

Moreover, in *The Third and Final Continent*, there is a relationship developed between Mrs. Croft, the old American lady, and an Indian alien who is supposed to settle down there. In this story the protagonist learns to accept the idiosyncrasy of the
lady of the house and over a period of time tend to get so used to it that without them he misses the normalcy.

Up to this point, it may be thought that the founders’ view of immigration and assimilation has come true and has worked effectively. It may be imagined that the succeeding generations of immigrants are on their way to be integrated into American nationality and American side of consciousness and the new cultural identity is gaining ascendancy and weight. However, it seems to be so simple calculation of shifting equation. To continue to interpret the hybrid of Indian-American coinage forces upon us, in a particularly acute way of discussion, Samuel Huntington’s “Who are we?” as the immigrants. The reply is traceable in Lahiri’s collective Indian community which is striving and/or getting along with the issues of isolation, separation, transition, displacement, cross-culturism, assimilation and identity.

Lahiri, herself, as an Indian-American, in an interview expresses her own experience as a process. She says,

When I was growing up in Rhode Island in the 1970s, I felt neither Indian nor American. Like many immigrant offspring, I felt intense pressure to be two things, loyal to the old world and fluent in the new, approved of on either side of the hyphen. Looking back, I see that this was generally the case. But my perception as a young girl was that I felt short at both ends, shuttling between two dimensions had nothing to do with one another. At home, I followed the costumes of my parents, speaking Bengali and eating rice and dal with my fingers. These ordinary facts seemed part of a secret, utterly alien way of life, and I took pains to hide them from my American friends. (Lahiri 2008)

Jhumpa Lahiri’s Interpreter of Maladies, in the same way, floats between India and the United States. In her stories about immigrants, Lahiri deftly examines the reactions to changes in culture, the ties that keep people to their homelands, the family ties that pull us in what sometimes seem to be opposite directions. Her book not only strikes the chord with those who feel alienated and lonely in foreign land but also to the appreciators of Indian culture of which food is an example. It calls for recognition, not of an individual but a community. It functions as a metaphor that
binds and at the same time separates one community from the other. In the next section of this chapter, the significance of food in Lahiri’s works is delineated in depth.

*The Namesake*, the first novel written by Jhumpa Lahiri, was published in 2003. It was a major national bestseller and was named the New York Magazine Book of the Year. It presents the tension of the contemporary generation and the cultural gap between the parents and the children in the Indian-American community. Ashima comes to the US after her marriage with Ashoke, a student in the US. After his studies, Ashoke begins to work as a professor in an American university. They name their first child as Gogol, in remembrance of the Russian writer, Nikolai Gogol. The name becomes a problem for Gogol, because he feels uncomfortable with the Russian name. It makes him to detach himself from his family members. When he grows up he changes his name to Nikhil and feels comfortable to mingle with others and slowly he gains contact with some girlfriends. But this too leads to a sense of loss of identity and later when his father dies, his attachment with his home renews. The novel concludes on the day of a send-off party to Ashima, where Gogol finds the book which his father presented to him during one of his birthdays and looks at the name Gogol. The novel focuses on the problems between first and second generations of the diasporic community, cultural clash and mainly on the identity problems faced by the diasporic community.

*Unaccustomed Earth* is divided into two parts. The first part consists of five short stories namely “Unaccustomed Earth”, “Hell-Heaven”, “A Choice of Accommodation”, “Only Goodness”, and “Nobody’s Business”. The second part entitled “Hema and Kaushik” consists of three interrelated short stories namely “Once in a Lifetime”, “Year’s End” and “Going Ashore”.

The first short story “Unaccustomed Earth”, from which the collection got its name, is about a Bengali family settled in Seattle. Ruma, a Bengali lawyer is married to an American, Adam. Ruma fears that she may have to shoulder the responsibility of taking care of her father as her mother died recently. However, Ruma’s father has other plans. He is looking forward to marry another Bengali woman Mrs. Bagchi, who lost her husband years ago.
“Hell-Heaven” is about the failed romance of a married Bengal woman, Aparna, with a family friend, Pranab Chakravarthy. The story is narrated by Aparna’s daughter. “A Choice of Accommodation” narrates two days in the life of Amit Sarkar and his American spouse Megan who is a surgeon. “Only Goodness” records the guilty consciousness of Sudha who thinks that she has turned her younger brother alcoholic by introducing it to him in the teen age. “Nobody’s Business” explores the complex relationships between Sangeeta who is called Sang, her lover Farouk and her roommate Paul. “Once in a Life time” consists of Hema’s reminiscences of her childhood crush, Kaushik. “Year’s End” contains Kaushik’s account of his mother’s tragic death and his father’s remarriage. “Going Ashore” narrates a short affair between Hema and Kaushik.

The last creation of this master storyteller is her most recent novel, The Lowland, published in 2013. In this fourth, most ambitious and melancholy book, Lahiri returns to the theme that drove her first novel and two story collections — exploring the duties of parents to children, and children to parents in the context of Bengali immigrants to America. She also enlarges her investigation, encompassing the effects of the Naxalism movement on a society and especially on a family.

As The Lowland begins, Subhash and Udayan Mitra are inseparable brothers growing up in Calcutta, where they engage in such mischief as sneaking into the Tolly Club, a private golf course for British residents. The younger brother, Udayan, instigates the high jinks. “He was blind to self-constraints,” Lahiri writes, “like an animal incapable of perceiving certain colors. But Subhash strove to minimize his existence, as other animals merged with bark or blades of grass.” (Lahiri 16)

Both brothers excel in school. Udayan studies physics in college and Subhash chemical engineering. But while Subhash immerses himself in his studies, Udayan becomes involved in the radical communist Naxalite movement that springs up in India in the late 1960s. For the first time in his life, Subhash does not follow his brother’s lead. Instead, he pursues his graduate studies in Rhode Island while Udayan engages increasingly in perilous revolutionary activity. Subhash forges an independent life apart from his brother, completing his doctorate while he reads occasional letters from Udayan that hide more than they reveal. The only significant
development Udayan reports is his secret marriage to the aloof and studious Gauri, who comes to play a major role in the book.

Catastrophic circumstances force Subhash to make a long-delayed return to India, where he decides that Udayan has contributed “to a movement that had been misguided, that had caused only damage, that had been ruthlessly dismantled. The only thing he’d altered was what their family had been.” (Lahiri 186)

While some of the characters in The Lowland spiral toward violence, bitterness or selfishness, Subhash grows increasingly conscientious and self-sacrificing. While he often bemoans his own ordinariness and instinct to be dutiful in contrast to Udayan’s rakish charm, when he marries, he becomes a sort of hero, providing for his family and caring for his daughter.

His good behavior does little to ease his suffering, however. While Lahiri’s first novel, The Namesake, was essentially hopeful, the story of a young man coming of age in America, The Lowland, which was just named a finalist for the Man Booker Prize, examines the hopelessness unleashed in a family when a favorite son chooses to become a terrorist. Lahiri expertly delves into the repercussions this causes in several generations of the Mitra family.

Lahiri demonstrates with every sentence that the Pulitzer Prize she won with her first book, Interpreter of Maladies, was no fluke. The beauty of this novel is in its everyday details, including Lahiri’s lush descriptions of landscapes, from a steamy, hyacinth-choked floodplain in Calcutta to the bracing Rhode Island seashore. As usual, her evocation of what it’s like to care for young children is spot-on — while asleep a baby “breathed with her whole body, like an animal or a machine.” Lahiri is particularly skillful at portraying the interplay of generations and the changes in individuals as they age. Although Subhash’s family life strays far from what he once imagined it would be, and he questions whether he made the right choices, he decides: “But he was a father now. He could no longer imagine a life in which he had not taken that step.” Lahiri has imagined Subhash’s life with uncommon grace and generosity.
Jhumpa Lahiri belongs to the second generation of the immigrants. As discussed earlier, her parents belong to Kolkata but she was born in London and brought up in Rhode Island. Hence, her perception towards the cultural alienation and identity crisis is different from the other two selected writers. This chapter deals with two short story collections - *Interpreter of Maladies* and *Unaccustomed Earth* and a novel - *The Namesake*. It analyzes the theme of identity-crisis in these works.

The next part of this chapter deals with the identity issues discussed in the various stories in her Pulitzer Prize winning debut book, *Interpreter of Maladies*. The collection of nine stories offers the reader a variety of experiences of Southeast Asians, Indians, often Bengali, living either in India, or after transplantation, in the United States. The characters are refugees but are negotiating a path in a country, in America, that seems to provide opportunities or places, as in *A Temporary Matter, The Third and Final Continent, Mrs. Sen’s, When Mr. Pirzada Came to Dine* and *This Blessed House*.

The third part discusses the depiction of identity crisis in her critically acclaimed first novel, *The Namesake*, which illuminates her favourite themes: the immigrant experience, the clash of cultures and the tangled ties between generations. The title *The Namesake* reflects the struggle Gogol Ganguli, the protagonist, goes through to identify with his unusual name. Lahiri pictures the sordid spectacle of racism, prejudice and marginalization by the unwelcoming society and he is a victim of it.

The last part of the chapter deals with the rootlessness, alienation, and quest for the identity of various characters portrayed in the short story collection, *Unaccustomed Earth*. In the collection, the novelist makes her observations of the second generation Indian Americans absorbed into the Western milieu, yet experiencing deep sense of isolation and alienation. All the stories deal with the theme of uprooting and assimilation with efforts made to establish connectivity among the characters.
II. Diaspora and Cross-Cultural Identity: A Study of *Interpreter of Maladies*

After winning Pulitzer Prize for fiction in 2000 for her debut book, *Interpreter of Maladies*, Jhumpa Lahiri says,

“When my father asked whether Indian nationals were eligible for the Pulitzer, I told him what I knew: that the book had to be by an American citizen, and deal, preferably with “American life.” At this point my mother interjected that the judges had made an exception in my case. I might have been naturalized as an American citizen when I was eighteen (I was born in London), but in her eyes I am first and forever Indian. Furthermore, my book, in her opinion, wasn’t about American life. It was about people like herself and myself—Indians. I suppose I should be grateful that my mother wasn’t on the Pulitzer committee.” (To Heaven without Dying 2000)

As Lahiri points out, her status as a racial “other” creates ambiguity about her identity. The stories give the readers the subtle way in which the fictionist probes into various maladies that disrupt relationships between protagonists living in exile. As they cope with life in the new world, their emotional turmoil continues to be the focus of Lahiri’s attention. Being an immigrant herself, Lahiri makes her soul searching study very absorbing, interpreting maladies as the dynamics of cultural identity and diaspora continue to intimidate her characters. Imbued with the sensual details of both Indian and American cultures, these stories speak with universal eloquence and compassion to everyone who has ever felt like an outsider. Like the interpreter of the title story—selected for both the O. Henry Award and The Best American Short Stories—Lahiri translates between the ancient traditions of her ancestors and sometimes baffling prospects of the New World. Including three stories first published in *The New Yorker, Interpreter of Maladies* introduces, in the words of Frederick Busch, “a writer with a steady, penetrating gaze. Lahiri honors the vastness and variousness of the world.” In this context, Amy Tan also concurs, “Lahiri is one of the finest short story writers I’ve read.” (Mariner Books: A Reader’s Guide 2003)
Lahiri, like many immigrants, is a second-generation immigrant who feels just as much at home in her parents’ homeland as she does in her own – yet she felt she belonged nowhere when she was young. The psychological dislocation that immigrants often suffer can cause their children to feel a similar sense of alienation. Although Lahiri’s parents ultimately adjusted to living in America, they must have frequently longed for their mother country, giving Lahiri the opportunity to observe, at first hand, the often painful adjustment of immigrants to life in an adopted country. Her narratives weave together not only the stories of immigrants, but also those of their children, who feel that they belong neither in one place nor another. Lahiri uses her acute powers of observation, together with her personal experiences, to create stories that transport readers to an imaginary landscape, exploring and exposing the frailties common to all of humanity.

About the title of this short stories collection, Lahiri says in an interview,

“The title came to me long before the book did, or, for that matter, the story to which it refers. In 1991, during my first year as a graduate student at Boston University, I bumped into an acquaintance of mine. I barely knew him, but the year before, he had very kindly helped me move to a one-bedroom apartment. When I asked him what he was doing with himself, he said he was working at a doctor’s office, interpreting for a doctor who had a number of Russian patients who had difficulty explaining their ailments in English. As I walked away from that brief conversation, I thought continuously about what a unique position it was, and by the time I’d reached my house, the phrase “interpreter of maladies” was planted in my head. I told myself, one day I’ll write a story with that title. Every now and then I struggled to find a story to suit the title. Nothing came to me. About five years passed. Then one day I jotted down a paragraph containing the bare bones of “Interpreter of Maladies” in my notebook. When I was putting the collection together, I knew from the beginning that this had to be the title story, because it best expresses, thematically, the predicament at the heart of the book—the dilemma, the difficulty, and often the impossibility of communicating emotional pain and affliction.
to others, as well as expressing it to ourselves. In some senses I view my position as a writer, insofar as I attempt to articulate these emotions, as a sort of interpreter as well.” (Chotiner 2008)

The “Prefatory Note” to *Interpreter of Maladies* categorically mentions that her stories tell the lives of Indians in exile, of people navigating between the strict traditions they’ve inherited and the inexplicable New World they must encounter every day. Her stories unerringly represent the emotional journeys of characters seeking love beyond the barriers of nations and generations. They are imbued with the sensual details of Indian culture. Though they don’t present a consistent picture of India, they do bring out the distinctive features of India, Indians and Indianness. At the same time, they also speak with universal eloquence to anyone who has ever felt like a foreigner.

India is an inevitable presence in all of her stories. She explores Indianness in all of them. A few of them take place in urban settings in or near Calcutta. Others deal with immigrants at different stages on the road to assimilation. The personal life of Jhumpa Lahiri is very prototype of diasporic culture. In spite of spending more than thirty years in the United States, she still feels ‘a bit of an outsider’. She confesses that her days in India are ‘a sort of parentheses’ in her life, and yet the fact that she is at heart an Indian cannot be denied. They are moving and authoritative pictures of culture shock and displaced identity. Lahiri’s stories center around the quest for identity. The protagonists are all Indians and are settled abroad. They suffer from alienation and are afflicted with a ‘sense of exile’. They lack the sense of belonging and are motivated to achieve communication in their new surroundings. They strongly feel that they are ‘clutching at a world that does not belong to them’. India still remains a home for them. Eliot, for instance, in the story entitled ‘Mrs. Sen’s’ understands Mrs. Sen’s fondness for her home.

“When Mrs. Sen said home, she meant India, not the apartment where she sat chopping vegetables”. (IM 116)

Lahiri’s prose is scattered with details of traditional Indian names, food, cooking and wardrobe, giving character and flavour to her stories. The rhythmic
sentences and her adept talent for depicting people and landscapes lull the reader. This is illustrated in the following excerpt from ‘The Treatment of Bibi Halder’:

At her insistence, we showed her our own photo albums embossed with designs of butterflies, she pored over the snapshots that chronicled the ceremony; butter poured in fires, garlands exchanged, vermilion-painted fish, trays of shells and silver coins. (IM 160)

Mrs. Sen, in the story ‘Mrs. Sen’s’, does not forget to mark her head with vermilion in spite of being in a foreign land:

He could see the perfectly centered part in her braided hair, which shaded with crushed vermilion and therefore appeared to be blushing. (IM 117)

Eliot, for whom Mrs. Sen works as a babysitter, notices her fondness for home i.e. India. Memories of her home constantly haunt her mind. Here, India is sharply contrasted with America. Mrs. Sen misses that warm and familiar atmosphere here in an alien land.

At home that is all you have to do… just raise your voice a bit, or express grief or joy of any kind, and one whole neighborhood and a half of another has come to share the news, to help with the arrangements. (IM 116)

At this point Eliot thinks of his own home where the same thing would bring the opposite reaction.

“They might call you,” Eliot said eventually to Mrs. Sen. “But they might complain that you were making too much noise”. (IM 117)

The sharp contrast between India and America is visible at almost every step and in every story. Lahiri is very objective in her comparison. While she brings out the warm, loving nature of the Indians, she also notes down the benefits of being in America. Lilia in ‘When Mr. Pirzada Came to Dine’ comments:
“I was assured a safe life, an easy life, a fine education, every opportunity.” (IM 26)

Lilia’s mother also remarks:

“Imagine having to place her in a decent school. Imagine her having to read during power failures by the light of kerosene lamps. Imagine the pressures, the tutors, and the constant exams.” (IM 27)

In spite of all the independence, luxuries and comforts provided by America, the immigrants experience a dire need to meet and talk to people from their own land. They do miss the love and affection of their own people. Lilia observes her parents closely ‘who used to trail their fingers at the start of each new semester, through the columns of the university directory, circling surnames familiar to their part of the world.’ (IM 24)

*Interpreter of Maladies* is replete with references to Indian food items. Food, though apparently a trivial matter, plays a very significant role in society as well as in nation. It symbolizes privilege, economic class and social position. For immigrants and non-residents, food becomes associated with their identity. It induces a sense of belonging in a foreign land. Here, familiar items of food bring immense pleasure. Hence, it becomes a significant aspect of cultural exchange and bonding. Jhumpa Lahiri uses food and dining as a vehicle to display the deterioration of familial bonds, community, and culture through the transition from Indian to American ways of life. This is most evident in the short stories *A Temporary Matter*, *When Mr. Pirzada Came to Dine*, and *Mrs. Sen’s*.

In the story entitled ‘*When Mr. Pirzada Came to Dine*’, food comes as a fistful soil from the motherland. Food is the factor that binds Mr. Pirzada with Lilia’s family. Mr. Pirzada comes from Dacca whereas Lilia’s parents are from India. But they relish the same food and this establishes affinity between them. They ate pickled mangoes with their meals, ate rice every night for supper with their hands.

“Like my parents, Mr. Pirzada took off his shoes before entering a room, chewed fennel seeds after meals as a digestive,
drank no alcohol, for dessert dipped austere biscuits into successive cups of tea.” (IM 25)

Lahiri’s ‘Mrs. Sen’s’ describes food as Mrs. Sen’s home, family, friend and her own country. She is a typical Bengali for whom fish is inevitable. Absence of fish in the diet for some time makes her sulk like a child. She shares her passion for Bengali food with Eliot. Whenever the fish arrives at the local stores, it is the greatest news for her.

‘The Third and Final Continent’ revolves around the life of a Bengali gentleman who pursues his studies in Britain and his job in America. In spite of their contact with three continents, he and his wife still maintain their cultural identity and food is one of the most important factors that help them in retaining their Indianness. Even in America the smell of steamed rice (IM 192) and a dish of chicken made with ‘fresh garlic and ginger on the stove’ (IM 193) makes his apartment a home.

Thus, food is one of the most significant links binding the non-residential Indians to their motherland. Even in India, most of these characters speak English, but English food has not become an intrinsic part of the diasporic identity. Not only the food items but eating habits also build up an Indian atmosphere in an alien land. Lilia observes the way Mr. Pirzada has his meals, ‘calmly creating a well in his rice to make room for a second helping of lentils’. The wife and the husband in ‘The Third and the Final Continent’ are anxious whether their son would retain his Indian way of eating food.

“We drive him to Cambridge to visit him, or bring him home for a weekend, so that he can eat rice with us with his hands, and speak in Bengali, things we sometimes worry he will no longer do after we die.” (IM 197)

The representation of the Indian culture is inherently present throughout her stories. Yet, it does not become exaggerated. In spite of the differences in ages, nationalities and religions, Lahiri’s characters demonstrate the universality of life experiences.
In ‘The Third and Final Continent’, we see the cultural differences between India, London and the U.S. through the eyes of a young Indian man. The story depicts not only the isolation of the immigrants travelling to a foreign country, but also describes the yearning and craving for love that lies in every human heart. Through the interaction between the young man and his aged landlady, the author shows how soothing and comforting life can become if there is someone who can just listen to you for a few moments regardless of the age and the nation to which one belongs. The young man’s simple gestures everyday could fill some colour into the life of the old and lonely landlady.

“I gave her a bit of my company, and assured her that I had checked the lock, and told her that the flag on the moon was splendid. Some evenings I sat beside her long after she had drifted off to sleep … On Fridays I made sure to put the rent in her hands.” (IM 189)

These characters are “lives in exile”, as Lahiri herself observes, and these are “defining and redefining the Indian-American diaspora identity” in particular and immigrant patches to this promise land in general. Love, tradition and identity issues are always at the heart of the story and of the characters. Who find happiness are those who can embrace their present circumstance while at the same time never forget their Indian roots. We learn about Mrs. Sen who sits on her floor everyday chopping vegetables in the same way she did in India, with the same knife she used there. Her adherence to an insistently Bengali identity is evident in the fact that she doesn’t even use a conventional western knife. She brings from India a special Blade ‘carved like the prow of a Vikings ship’ used for cutting food ingredients. The blade which is called bonti in Bengali, is not a mere tool, it is in Mrs., Sen’s recollection ‘the symbolic center of a community of Indian women. If bonti symbolizes Mrs. Sen’s Bengali identity, her vexed relationship with the car represents the failure to forge a successful Bengali-American self. Ashutosh Dubey suggests that Mrs. Sen’s stubborn refusal to learn driving can be seen as a subconscious way of her resistance to the dictated terms of this new world. “Brought up in a culture where she could rely on a Chauffeur-driven car”, Mrs. Sen is simply unable to master the quintessentially American skill of driving. “To gain access to the fish she craves, she has to call her
husband at work and coax him to go to the seaside shop that sells the fresh catch.”

(IM 117)

Although in other stories in this collection, we are presented with some immigrant women, as in *Interpreter of Maladies* and in *The Third and the Final Continent*, who may find a balance between Bengal and America, Mrs. Sen, early in the story, asserts of her home in Calcutta: “Everything is there….Here is nothing” (IM 118). It suggests that Mrs. Sen’s psychological state is not conducive to adaptation and assimilation. Perhaps it is meant to see the story as a snapshot of a woman in the early years of her life as a struggling immigrant. However, there is a point which is worth contemplating: this story is not written by someone from the community of the first generation of immigrants but by Jhumpa Lahiri, as a member of the second generation and as an academic, who is supposed to, a large extent, has been immersed in American culture through education and living. The point is that she is not yet a part of America as its founders suggested.

Lahiri’s collection echoes both the traditional identity politics of immigration to develop balance and harmony in the new world and modern identity politics of locating the hole in post-American texture of human geography which keeps silence about the place and significance of the groups. While the former politicizes identity of immigrants as free individuals with the whole democratic society on the assumption of the rule of majority, the recent settlers understand freedom of individuals within the cultural, religious and ethnic groups to protect their liberal identity in a multicultural context. As John Fonte argues, while rereading Francis Fukuyama’s article published in Journal of Democracy (2006), “today multiculturalism [is]understood not just as tolerance of cultural diversity [to value individuals], but as the demand for legal recognition of racial, religious or cultural groups” (Fonte 2006). Therefore, although the readers of Lahiri’s *Interpreter of Maladies* are oscillated between balanced and imbalanced cases of the immigrants, they are illustrated with such characters floating in the ocean of India and Indians.

The stories with an American setting indicate a changing national cast of real and fictional characters. For instance, Mrs. Sen, the protagonist of her eponymous story, is a fish out of water for feeling diminished without a daily regime of fresh halibut (fish): at least other 50000 immigrants from Bengal share her tastes. “The
Third and the Final Continent’ is a descriptive and emotional piece that portrays the isolation of immigrants travelling to a foreign country.

Many characters of Jhumpa Lahiri are also derived from autobiographical experiences. Bibi Haldar, for instance, is one such character. Lahiri has herself said in an interview that for that story, she took as her subject a young woman whom she got to know over the course of a couple of visits. She never saw her having any health problems – but she knew that the woman wanted to get married.

The characters are semi-real and most of them are composites, but situations are invented. Mr. Pirzada is a man who actually went to Lahiri’s place but she was only four then, not ten. She had seen photos of him in the family album but knew only that he was a Muslim. She had no details. Their relationship is imagined. Mrs. Sen is based on Lahiri’s mother who babysat in their home. She saw her one way but imagined that an American child may see her differently, reacting with curiosity, fascination, or fear to the things Lahiri took for granted.

In the presentation of woman, Lahiri doesn’t stray too far beyond societal parameters. She does not go deep into the psyche of woman or does not unravel each and every emotion for her primary theme is that of expatriates. Though the presentation of Indians and Indianness is her chief aim, her characters have universal traits. Her stories are emotional chess games, focusing largely on the subtleties of the characters’ internal processing. With their fragile emotional states, hesitant gestures and tightrope wanderings on the brink of psychological rupture, characters are waxed into exploring assorted facets of morality, alienation, list and dysfunction. A taxi driver in the title story fantasizes about a married passenger who confesses her deepest secrets to him with hopes of either insight or absolution. ‘Sexy’ peeps into the complexities of intercultural infidelity with a married man; and it is declared that only “relations” will “calm the blood” of a village outcast afflicted with a most mysterious ailment in ‘The Treatment of Bibi Haldar’. In ‘The Third and Final Continent’, versions of solitude and isolation are displayed with cultural and generational twists through the young man and his landlady. All these characters manifest the universal traits i.e. the need for love, warmth and even physical relationship.
Lahiri portrays her characters from an objective point of view and is quite non-judgmental about them. However, she breathes unpredictable life into the characters and the reader finishes each story reseduced, wishing she could spend a whole novel with its character.

*Interpreter of Maladies* is the result of the writer’s “desire to force the two worlds she occupied to mingle on the page as she was not brave enough, or mature enough, to allow in life” (Lahiri, *My Two Lives*). The stories, set across national, but also generation, or gender frontiers, contribute to the writer’s finally finding an identity of her own, reconciling her two selves as, “like many immigrant offspring, I felt intense pressure to be two things, loyal to the old world and fluent in the new, approved of on either side of the hyphen” (Lahiri, *My Two Lives*). Consequently, the collection may be interpreted as the writer’s journey into her new, even if not necessarily true, self, a journey of initiation into the major adaptation problems of the contemporary world. The writer’s journey, partially recorded in her stories, evolves from the condition of the individual for whom “one plus one did not equal two but zero, my conflicting selves always cancelling each other out” to that of the individual finally aware that

“one plus one equals two, both in my work and in my daily existence, [the] traditions on either side of the hyphen dwell[ing] in me like siblings, still occasionally sparring, one outshining the other depending on the day” (Lahiri, *My Two Lives*)

On a first reading, Jhumpa Lahiri’s collection of short stories seems to offer an image of the complicated cultural relationships between India and the West, investigating the troubled position of the displaced individual caught between two cultures which, in most cases, he/ she finds unfamiliar. On a second, more in-depth reading, all the stories record journeys across visible and invisible frontiers that the characters must transgress in order to find their real self.

Lahiri explores the idea that identity, especially for immigrants, is something that must be sought. We gain a sense of identity through family, society and culture. For the culturally displaced, this is a difficult endeavour. The speaker in ‘*The Third and Final Continent*’ searches for his identity across continents. He is born in Asia,
travels to Europe to study, and finally immigrates to North America. Although he has adapted to the British way of life as a student, it is not a true cultural integration as he lives in a ‘house occupied entirely by penniless Bengali bachelors like [himself]’ (IM 173). He attempts to keep his cultural identity intact by keeping the most trivial of Indian traditions alive, such as eating ‘egg curry’ (IM 173). When he is posted to America he relies on the Britishness that he has learned in London, converting ‘ounces to grams’ and comparing ‘prices to things in England’ (IM 175) as a survival strategy. His search for identity is further strained by his arranged marriage, more or less to enroot his new job in America, to a woman he has never met. In America, his cultural conflict is manifest in his refusal to eat ‘hamburgers or hot dogs’ (IM 175), as the consumption of beef is sacrilegious according to his Hindu beliefs.

The speaker is burdened with a fragmented sense of identity; constantly pulled in opposite directions between Indian culture and the need to assimilate in America. When he meets his centenarian landlady, Mrs Croft, he is bewildered by her age and her repetitious phrases while admiring her strength in surviving for so long. In contrast to his relationship with his own mother, whose rejection of life had further exacerbated the speaker’s sense of emotional isolation, through his fondness for Mrs. Croft, and his admiration for her ability to accept the inevitable, he gradually learns that, although he is ‘bewildered by each mile [he has] traveled … each person [he has] known’ (IM 198), life is a strange amalgam.

In contrast with the speaker, his wife Mala is able to maintain her identity because she takes on the role of a traditional Indian wife. The speaker finds their relationship strained, however – they were ‘strangers’ (IM 192) – until during a visit to Mrs. Croft, who measures Mala through her own innate sense of decorum rather than her exotic dissimilarities to the American ideal, declares her to be ‘a perfect lady’ (IM 195). The speaker sees only their differences, whereas Mrs. Croft appreciates Mala’s grace and charm. The speaker’s ability to adjust is, Lahiri points out, a human adaptation. He has discovered that the ability to feel at home no matter what country he lives in comes only from having a strong sense of self. The ‘ambition that had first hurled [him] across the world’ (IM 197) is part of his ability to know himself and to recognize that the strength he gains from his origins is the ideal foundation on which to build a strong identity.
The frontier itself requires a more nuanced interpretation. It is not only the visible, national, in particular, frontier, between cultures that people have to cross, but also the invisible frontiers which separate individuals belonging to one and the same culture. The frontier is “an elusive line, visible and invisible, physical and metaphorical, amoral and moral” (Rushdie 411) and the idea behind Lahiri’s stories is that we all have to fight our share of frontier wars. Jhumpa Lahiri seems to fictionally agree that “the journey creates us. We become the frontiers we cross” (Rushdie 410). And this is mainly because she herself, although born in London and then spending the rest of her life in the United States, was, however, born to Bengali Indian parents, which inevitably made her be looked at as an immigrant and “the immigrant's journey, no matter how ultimately rewarding, is founded on departure and deprivation, [although] it secures for the subsequent generation a sense of arrival and advantage” (Lahiri, My Two Lives).

It is primarily because of her origin that the critics were tempted to include Interpreter of Maladies, and her subsequent productions, in the Asian American literature section and to approach it as a sample of Asian American writing. Yet, we consider that Lahiri’s artistic intention is more specifically associated with her desire to move beyond the stereotypical image of Indianness and, through her writing, to find an identity and discover a voice able to help her overcome the stigma of marginality (Hoffman 268).

Out of the nine stories, three are set in India, whereas six are set in America, focusing on the lives of first or second generation Americans of Indian origin. According to Michiko Kakutani,

“Many of Ms. Lahiri's people are Indian immigrants trying to adjust to a new life in the United States, and their cultural displacement is a kind of index of a more existential sense of dislocation.” (Kakutani 48)

Yet, apart from the setting of some of the stories and the clearly indicated origin of the protagonists of some other, Lahiri’s collection seems to resist the stereotypes of Indianness and the clichés associated with the inevitable clash between the East and the West. The writer is more inclined to do away with prejudice and go beyond the stereotypical images that in most cases underlie and undermine these
relationships. The encounter between the East and the West, the migration of individuals across national frontiers is nothing but a pretext for Lahiri to probe deep into the difficulties generated by the encounter between the self and the Other, into the condition of the troubled modern self and, more importantly, to investigate human nature. In this respect, Jhumpa Lahiri’s writings develop along lines characteristic for most contemporary fiction, equally interested in the essence of the individual consciousness and in the self as the converging point of various cultural forces, considering both the private and the public spheres and the way in which they interact and influence each other.

Lahiri’s stories explore human relations in a cultural context, but the writer’s approach to culture seems to be in terms of the two possible paradigms, ‘large’ and respectively ‘small’ culture. Culture is thus looked at both as the “large ethnic, national or international” entities and as “any cohesive social grouping with no necessary subordination to large cultures” (Holliday, Hyde, Kullman 63). Therefore, none of the stories exclusively focuses on the encounter between the large cultures or on the one between and within the small cultures, but rather on the tension generated by the fact that individuals perforce evolve in both. Lahiri’s characters seem to confirm that

“Dislocation is the norm rather than the aberration in our time, but even in the unlikely event that we spend an entire lifetime in one place, the fabulous diverseness with which we live reminds us constantly that we are no longer the norm and the centre […].” (Hoffman 275)

It is no longer and only the clash between national cultures that represents the writer’s main interest, although some of Lahiri’s protagonists do seem to conform to the typical image of the contemporary migrant, the individual “severed from his roots, often transplanted into a new language, always obliged to learn the ways of a new community […] forced to face the great questions of change and adaptation” (Rushdie 415). It is the case of the protagonist of ‘The Third and Final Continent’ who looks at himself from the very beginning as the typical migrant. He says,

“I left India in 1964, with a certificate in commerce and the equivalent, in those days, often dollars to my name. […] I lived in north London,
in Finsbury Park, in a house occupied entirely by penniless Bengali bachelors like myself, […] all struggling to educate and establish ourselves abroad.” (IM 173)

It is also the case of Mrs. Sen in ‘Mrs. Sen’s’ or Shoba and Shukumar in ‘A Temporary Matter’. Lahiri’s attempt is to see beyond the visible frontiers and to plunge deeper into the springs of human action. That is why she frequently deals with problematic relationships between individuals within one and the same society, be it American or Indian. Many of her stories treat marriage and the tense relationships within couples.

‘This Blessed House’ focuses on the troubled relationships within the couple. “At the urging of their matchmakers, [Sanjeev and Twinkle] married in India, amid hundreds of well-wishers” (IM 143) just to realize soon how different they are and how lonely they felt. Miranda, the protagonist of ‘Sexy’ also feels insecure in the relationship she has with a married man, the story being about her becoming aware of her displacement and loneliness.

‘A Temporary Matter’ is about a couple growing estranged from each other after the death of their child and how they “become experts at avoiding each other in their three-bedroom house, spending as much time on separate floors as possible” (IM 4). It is fully set in America, but Shoba and Shukumar are of Indian origin. The story is far from analyzing their inability to adapt to a hostile cultural environment. It rather focuses on the deteriorating relationships between a husband and a wife after the death of their child and, although the two would be expected to stick together given the tragic incident and the threatening cultural environment, the walls separating the young couple become even thicker in spite of their common origin. They find it impossible to communicate and get estranged to the point of separating.

‘A Real Durwan’ is set in India and features only characters whose origin is not commented on since they are natives in their own country. The protagonist of the story is a sixty-year-old woman, deported to Calcutta as a result of the Partition, whose problems of adaptability to a new culture are brought to the fore. “No one doubted she was a refugee; the accent in her Bengali made that clear” (IM 72), which is why she is always inclined “to exaggerate her past at such elaborate lengths and
heights” (IM 73) in order to protect herself against the aggressiveness of the new cultural environment. From the point of view of the Westerner inclined to prejudice and stereotyping, the story might be read as focusing on the cruelty of the Indians and their indifference to the Other, since Boori Ma, accused of theft by those whom she had served for years in exchange for a shelter, is cruelly thrown into the street. Yet, if one forgets that the story’s setting is Calcutta, one realizes that the story is about failed human relationships, about indifference and cruelty caused by poverty. Out of the nine stories, one seems to have a more accentuated political content, in the sense that, because of an explicit reference to the Bangladeshi war of independence in 1971, the reader is tempted to see it as dealing with contemporary political issues.

[Mr. Pirzada] came from Dacca, now the capital of Bangladesh, but then [1971] a part of Pakistan. That year Pakistan was engaged in civil war. The eastern frontier, where Dacca was located, was fighting for autonomy from the ruling regime in the west. (IM 23)

The story, however, narrated from the point of view of the child Lilia, definitely resists politicizing, bringing to the fore instead issues related to identity and intercultural communication. It is the child’s way of perceiving the world and her consciousness that represents the story’s main interest. Lilia is the one whose initiation depends on her becoming aware of the difference between the self and the other across the visible and the invisible frontiers.

“Like my parents, Mr. Pirzada took off his shoes before entering a room, […] drank no alcohol […]. Nevertheless my father insisted that I understand the difference and he led me to a map of the world taped to the wall over his desk. […] “Mr. Pirzada is Bengali, but he is Muslim,” my father informed me. “Therefore he lives in East Pakistan, not India.” (IM 26)

Yet, although Lahiri’s work may be interpreted as essentially focusing on the problems of immigrants, “her real subject is miscommunication. The relationships in her stories are a series of missed connections” (Brians 196). It is not so much the visible frontiers that the writer seems to be obsessed with as the invisible ones that do tend to keep people apart. The individual in Lahiri’s stories is not simply Indian or
American, Indian in America, or Indian in India, or American of Indian origin in India. The individual is rather the focus of much more complicated cultural relations and tensions. Culture, therefore, for Lahiri, is not understood in an essentialist manner, as national culture, homogeneous and unitary, but as a fluid, creative social force which binds different groupings and aspects of behaviour in different ways, both constructing and constructed by people in a piecemeal fashion to produce myriad combinations and configurations. (Holliday, Hyde, Kullman 3)

Ever since Interpreter of Maladies was published, she has been variously proclaimed to be an “American writer,” an “Indian-American author,” an “NRI” (non-residential Indian), and an “ABCD” (American born confused desi). Her writings are described as “diaspora fiction” by Indian scholars and “immigrant fiction” by American critics. (Shuchen 126) It is just by overcoming our tendency to label and to see and interpret the world in black and white that we are able to read Lahiri’s stories as what they really are – an insight into the essentials of life, but also an investigation of the condition of the individual in the contemporary world.

According to Brada Williams,

[…] a deeper look reveals the intricate use of pattern and motif to bind the stories together, including the recurring themes of the barriers to and opportunities for human communication; community, including marital, extra-marital, and parent-child relationships; and the dichotomy of care and neglect. (Williams 114)

Lahiri’s stories bring to the fore issues related to identity, intercultural communication, the cultural clash, stereotyping and otherizing, and see all these problems as having to do with human nature rather than being strictly associated with the condition of the immigrant or Indianness.

“[The] nine stories have in common certain themes and motifs, such as exile, displacement, identity, loneliness, difficult relationships, and problems about communication.” (Shuchen 126)

Essentially, Lahiri’s stories deal with the encounter between self and other, individual identity being in most cases the result of a mirroring effect. Although ethnicity seems to be central to all the stories, Lahiri is too little interested in ethnic
aspects and Indianness is seldom, if ever, exaggerated. She resorts to India either as the setting of her stories or as place or cultural set of customs and beliefs most characters refer themselves to in order to define their identity. The stories also feature characters that are either Indian or Indian American. Yet, what Lahiri tries to avoid is the exoticism associated in the mind of the Westerners with either the locale or the people. She rather investigates and draws attention to problems of more general human interest that have nothing to do with India or being Indian either in India or America.

The stories may be considered equally heterogeneous if analyzed in terms of the narrative technique employed. Two of the stories, ‘When Mr. Pirzada Came to Dine’ and ‘The Third and Final Continent’ are first-person narratives. The former is narrated from the point of view of a ten-year child, the latter from the perspective of an Indian emigrant in America. The rest are third-person narratives, but the story is filtered through the consciousness and sensibility of a more or less involved character. It would be difficult to say whether Lahiri’s choice of method has anything to do with a certain pattern she has intended for the stories. But the effect she has obtained is a kaleidoscopic one. The reader is offered the possibility to look at the issues the stories deal with from various angles, although we cannot speak about a multiple point of view narrative. As she says,

“I like it [language] to be plain. It appeals to me more. There’s form and there’s function and I have never been a fan of just form. Even now in my own work, I just want to get it less—get it plainer. When I rework things I try to get it as simple as I can.” (Chotiner 2008)

_Interpreter of Maladies_ attempts to offer an interpretation of the maladies of the contemporary society and of the individual inevitably caught between here and there and yet belonging neither here nor there. Just like Mr. Kapasi, Lahiri would like to serve “as an interpreter between nations” (IM 59), but mainly as an interpreter for the modern individual’s anxieties and torment.
III. There’s Much in a Name: Gogol’s Quest for Self in
*The Namesake*

“What is in thy name?”… The most popular Shakespearean quotation suggests that the ‘name’ is meaningless in the existence of a human being. But, Jhumpa Lahiri’s novel *The Namesake* has something contrary to say. Whether we accept or not, a ‘name’ plays an important role in an individual’s life. A name is probably the first and foremost thing which gives identity to the person.

As a popular young writer of Indian background, Jhumpa Lahiri is a sort of representative figure for the Diasporans who do not fully understand what it means to straddle the line between two cultures. Caught between two worlds with an ever increasing multiplicity of identities, Jhumpa Lahiri examines and defines the conditions of the Diasporic people. She explores the ideas of cultural and personal isolations and identities through her various characters, whose cultural isolation result in the personal. Her stories draw upon different aspects of Lahiri’s Indian background and project the life of second generation Indian Americans like Lahiri herself. *The Namesake* contains themes of conflict in relationships between couples, families, and friends. Through these relationships she explores ideas of isolation and identity, both personal and cultural. The characters frequently encounter crisis of identity, which are tied to their inabilities to reconcile their American identity with their Indian identity. As a result, her work gives us a rather bleak outlook on the future of her characters reflecting some of Lahiri's concerns about their real-life analogues. She often correlates her characters' cultural isolation with extreme personal isolation, suggesting that the cultural isolation causes the personal. The instances in which this cultural isolation are resolved or avoided are generally accompanied by a similar resolution or avoidance of personal isolation.

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

"America is a real presence in the book; the characters must struggle and come to terms with what it means to live here [in America], to be brought up here, to belong and not belong here." (Houghton 2007)

Lahiri admits that as the novel conveys the experiences of alienation of the migrants from their roots, it is to some extent autobiographical. Addressing the themes of immigration, collision of cultures and the importance of the names, The Namesake portrays the struggle of immigration and the issues of identity. The protagonist of the novel is constantly reminded of the uniqueness of his name, ‘Gogol’. The Namesake centers on the psychological travails of Gogol who tries to frame a sense of identity and individuality for himself out of the cultural assimilation of his existence. He had to endure a Russian name, with which he cannot relate to America where he lives along with his parents, who are neither totally accepted nor been able to assimilate themselves fully into American social life. The oddness of this name strikes him time and again. Throughout the novel, Gogol is haunted by this strange name. Even when he changes it to Nikhil, he realizes that he cannot get away from it. And it is this predicament that gives the novel its title, The Namesake.

About the controversy of name of Gogol, Lahiri says in an interview,

"But I think that for the child of immigrant, the existence of two names kind of speaks so strongly for the very predicament of many children of immigrants. On the other hand, the problem for the children of immigrants - those with strong ties to their country of origin - is that
they feel neither one thing nor the other. This has been my experience, in any case. For example, I never know how to answer the question: "Where are you from?" If I say I'm from Rhode Island, people are seldom satisfied. They want to know more, based on things such as my name, my appearance, etc. Alternatively, if I say I'm from India, a place where I was not born and have never lived, this is also inaccurate. It bothers me less now. But it bothered me growing up, the feeling that there was no single place to which I fully belonged."

(Book Browse 2007)

Moreover, she acknowledged the influence of Russian writer Nikolai Gogol’s ‘The Overcoat’:

“The Overcoat is such a superb story. It really does haunt me the way it haunts the character of Ashoke in the novel… Of course, without the inspiration of Nikolai Gogol, without his name and without his writing, my novel would never have been conceived. In that respect, this book came out of Gogol’s overcoat, quite literally.” (Houghton 2007)

The statement is a reaffirmation of the often quoted phrase of Dostoyevsky:

“We all came out of Gogol’s Overcoat.” (TN 78)

In The Namesake, Lahiri makes her protagonist Ashoke emerge out of Gogol’s overcoat, a man in exile and diaspora, attempting to build a dream for his family. When his son is born, due to delay in getting a name chosen by the grandmother, he christens him Gogol – the namesake of Nikolai Gogol. And Gogol grows up with a name that seems to make him stand apart from the rest of his classmates:

Though substitute teachers at school always pause, looking apologetic when they arrive at his name on the roster, forcing Gogol to call out, before being summoned, ‘that’s me’, teachers in the school system know not to give it a second thought. After a year or two, the students no longer tease and say, ‘giggle’ or ‘gargle’. (TN 66)
Though Gogol constantly wonders about the reason for having such an unusual name, his father harbours no doubts about the appropriateness of the name. To him, Gogol was his saviour because it was a volume of Gogol’s writings that he was reading when the terrible train accident took place. Two hundred and nine kilometers away from Calcutta, when seven bogies derailed at 2:30 in the morning, it was the book and a few pages that he clutched in his hands which saved him from death. People around him were dead and even he was almost left behind by the search party. And yet at the last moment he was saved. As he remembers it:

But the lantern lights lingered just long enough for Ashoke to raise his hand, a gesture that he believed would consume the small fragment of life left in him. He was still clutching a single page of The Overcoat, crumpled tightly in his fist, and when he raised his hand, the wad of paper drooped from his fingers. ‘Wait’ he heard a voice cry out. ‘The fellow by that book I saw him move.’ (TN 18)

When it is time for Gogol to begin school, his unusual name which is only his ‘daaknam’ (pet name) and the need for ‘bhaalonaam’ (official name) disconcerts him:

There is a reason Gogol doesn’t want to go to kindergarten. His parents have told him that at school, instead of being called Gogol, he will be called by a new name, a good name, which his parents have finally decided on, just in time for him to begin his formal education. The name, Nikhil, is artfully connected to the old. Not only is it a perfectly respectable Bengali good name, meaning he who is entire, encompassing all, but it also bears a satisfying resemblance to Nikolai, the first name of the Russian Gogol. (TN 56)

This unusualness confuses Mrs. Lapidus during the proceeding of the admission of the child. The father tries to explain the idea of the good name and the pet name to the teacher. Cultural differences create confusion and Mrs. Lapidus cannot understand the idea. So Gogol continues to be his name, which fastens itself tightly to him, refusing to go. All through his early years, Gogol has this attitude towards his name. Lahiri describes various experiences of Gogol that are directly
related to his name. Interestingly, “Gogol recognizes pieces of himself in road signs: GO LEFT, GO RIGHT, GO SLOW.” (TN 66)

As Gogol he grows up, having the surname of a revered author from the western culture as his first name plays havoc on his psyche.

By now he’s come to hate questions pertaining to his name, hates having constantly to explain. He hates having to tell people that it doesn’t mean anything “in Indian.” . . . He hates that his name is both absurd and obscure, that it has nothing to do with who he is, that it is neither Indian nor American, but of all things Russian. He hates having to live with it, with a pet name turned good name, day after day, second after second. (TN 75)

On his fourteenth birthday, Gogol receives the book, The Short Stories of Nikolai Gogol as a birthday gift from his father. He looks intently on the picture of the author searching for resemblances and is relieved to see no resemblance. But in his high school days, Gogol hears from Mr. Lawson about the writer Gogol’s life. Mr. Lawson was the first teacher to know and care about Gogol the author. As Gogol listens the details of Nikolai Gogol’s life, he is both surprised and shocked. Nikolai’s friendship with Pushkin, his dismay at the reception, of his comic play The Government Inspector, his paranoid frustration, his morbidity, his melancholia, his depression, his steady decline into madness, his slow death by starvation- all these come as a surprise to Gogol. Gogol tells all these to his parents, but they comfort him saying that Gogol was also a genius. But strangely enough, like the writer Gogol, the protagonist Gogol turns out to be a loner. He cannot date with anyone in the High School. He never attends any parties or dances. The single girl he kisses leaves him at once guilty or exhilarated. He always feels an existential fragmentation with his names, Nikhil and Gogol. When his friend exclaims, “I can’t believe you kissed her Gogol”, he nearly says, “It wasn’t me”. (TN 96)

The climax comes when he wants to change his name. ‘Gogol’ is a strange name to his American peers, being a Russian namesake, having also nothing to do with his Bengali tradition. He argues with his parents that none took him seriously being named after a man who was known for his lifelong unhappiness and mental
instability which led to his starving himself to death. He tells the judge at the court room,

“I hate the name Gogol… I’ve always hated it.” (TN 102)

This revolt with his name finally culminates with his arrival in New Haven, where he legally changes his name to Nikhil. Ironically, he had abhorred this name too as a child. Moreover, he learns that Nikolai Gogol also renamed himself simplifying his surname at the age of twenty-two. This change, however, strikes at the core of Indian tradition where “individual names are sacred, inviolable.” By changing his name, it has become ‘easier to ignore his parents, to tune out their concerns and pleas.’ As everything around him is new at Yale, going by a new name does not seem strange to him. Even his parents adjust to it by calling him Nikhil in front of his friends. But even the change of his name does not change the course of luck in his life. Like the life and characters of Nikolai Gogol, his life too seems to be mingled with pathos and black humor. Thus, by focusing on Gogol’s name as a marker of his crisis of unframable identity, Lahiri has ventured into the contested minefield of names that dogs the immigrant families in America and elsewhere. In a single sweep, she has brought under one roof the cultural plight of the non-Americans, irrespective of their individual nationalities – all in a conscious and calculated way trying to pass off as naturalized Americans, very much like the Ganguli seniors.

For second generation immigrants, the notion of India is quite unlike that of their parents’ generation. For instance, after a decade and a half in America the Ganguli couple, along with their two children, makes a longish trip of eight months to India. For the couple it is homecoming, but for their children, it is an ordeal. The parents tell the children to treat it “as a long vacation” (TN 79), the children nonetheless are crestfallen. For Gogol, eight months in India without his own room and without his friends is unimaginable. Parents and children perceive the Mother Country differently owing to “changes in the global context and their repercussions in daily life” (Kral 65). Ashoke and Ashima, who represent the many young people who went to the United States in the wake of the 1965 Immigration Act that encouraged immigration of the educated and the skilled, decades later, stand for the estimated 20 million Indian diaspora (Sen 73) that feels affiliated to both its country of origin and
country of adoption. But for Gogol the idea of the “Mother Country” is almost a burden. From his position, the novel raises important questions:

“The issue of cultural identity – What constitutes it? Who is a part of which culture? Is Gogol Bengali, American or Bengali American? – permeates the novel.” (Oates 178)

On one occasion Gogol learns about the complexities involved in the lives of youngsters like him. A speaker at an academic event declares, “ABCDs are unable to answer the question ‘Where are you from?’” (TN 118). He gathers that the term ABCD stands for American-Born Confused Desi. He thinks the letter C could also stand for conflicted. By providing this little detail, Lahiri hints at the complications involved – Gogol’s generation that looks confused to others actually feels a sense of conflict.

Through Ashima and Ashoke, Lahiri presents the aura of loneliness of the expatriate families in an adopted country; a clash of their familial tradition as against everyday experience and the struggle of their Americanized children with their question of identity and belonging. This often results in inwardness and isolation, both mental and physical, as we find in Gogol:

He grows to appreciate being utterly disconnected from the world. He grows used to the quiet, the scent of sun-warmed wood…He feels no nostalgia for the vacation he’s spent with his family, and he realizes now that they were never really true vacations at all. (TN 154)

Moreover, just like Interpreter of Maladies, in this novel too, food serves as an important medium to show the vast difference between the two different cultures. When Gogol falls in love with Maxine, he is actually fascinated by the Ratliff house, and Gerald & Lydia (Maxine’s parents)’s manner of living the life. Consciously, he suppresses his innate identity and tries to fit himself in the borrowed robs of American culture in order to be one of them. He quickly becomes enchanted with Maxine’s easy manner, her large sprawling house and her parents, who charm him with their laid-back life style. The terms of endearment they commonly use and the physical affection they demonstrate are absent in the lives of his parents. As he finds nothing appealing about his own home and life style, Gogol is taken with how Maxine and her
parents live with their food, their wines, and their holidays. But finding a striking contrast between Maxine’s disposition and his own, He observes,

She has the gift of accepting life; . . . he realizes that she never wished she were anyone other than herself, raised in any other place, in any other way. This, in his opinion, is the biggest difference between them, a thing by far more foreign to him than the beautiful house she’d grown up in, her education at private schools. (TN 138)

The medium of food and dining etiquettes serve as an intrinsic part to build this enchantment towards Maxine and her parents’ life style:

“He learns to love the food she and her parents eat, the polenta and risotto, the bouillabaisse and osso buco, the meat baked in parchment paper. He comes to expect the weight of their flatware in his hands, and to keep the cloth napkin, still partially folded, on his lap. He learns that one does not grate Parmesan cheese over pasta dishes containing seafood. He learns not to put wooden spoons in the dishwater... he learns to anticipate, every evening, the sound of a cork emerging from a fresh bottle of wine.” (TN 137)

After witnessing the way of life lived by Ratliffs, he unconsciously compares his own parents with them. The way his parents behave when they are the host in the parties at home is totally different from the Ratliffs as the hosts. The Ratliffs are more decent and they enjoy the party thoroughly whereas the Gangulies seem much stressed to manage the event. At the Ganguli house, ‘meat and fish are served side by side; so many courses that people had to eat in shifts, the food still in the pans they were cooked in crowding the table. Unlike Gerald and Lydia, who preside at the center of their dinners, his parents behave more like caterers in their own home, solicitous and watchful, waiting until most of their guests’ plates were stacked by the sink in order finally to help themselves’ (TN 140-141). This diversity in the food and dining manners between the two families actually depicts the vast cultural difference between the two countries.
This dilemma makes him oblivious of his own charm; he fails glaringly to comprehend how alluring he is to women. The rebellious instinct and his corresponding insecurity lands him in the company of American women, both married and unmarried, from Kim to Ruth, from Maxine and finally Moushumi. He finds himself loaded with a plethora of emotions which creates turmoil within as he faces a conspicuous lack of expressibility. This, however, is a deliberate plan on the part of the author herself, as she opines in a Newsweek Interview:

“I like to write about people who think in a way they can’t fully express.” (Newsweek, 20/09/1999)

Thus, Gogol’s psyche serves as a vehicle through and around which Lahiri draws other characters. The emotional conflict in him finds psychological manifestation in the framing of his distinctive cultural identity. Gogol is a product of matrix culture, with the indices of Indian tradition and American social traits running parallel to each other beyond any point of convergence. On a larger scale, this turmoil is starkly indicative of the schism between the second generation Indians’ attempts at Americanizing themselves and, the level of comfortability, on the other hand, of the native Americans with the Americanized Indians. This mental hiatus is apparent, for instance,

… in stores, of cashiers smirking at his parents’ accents, and of salesmen who prefer to direct their conversation to Gogol, as though their parents were either incompetent or deaf. (TN 68)

Gogol recovers from this insecurity only when Ashoke narrates him about his cathartic train accident happened twenty eight years ago, and

…suddenly the sound of his pet name, uttered by his father as he has been accustomed to hearing it all the life, means something completely new, bound up with a catastrophe he was unwittingly embodied for years. (TN 124)

He feels ‘awkward and oddly ashamed.’ Finally, the revelation comes to him at the sudden death of his father when he realizes that he cannot ignore his past connections to a culture and tradition. He picks up the book of Nikolai Gogol given
by his father on his fourteenth birthday. The rest of the story leads him to adopt his traditional past for a blissful future. He breaks with Maxine and opts to marry a Bengali girl, Maushumi. The relationship finally breaks up as she continues to have an affair with her former boyfriend.

Gogol recollects how his family’s life was a series of incidents: beginning with his father’s train accident which inspired him to take up the challenge of immigrant life; his acquiring his name ‘Gogol’ which distressed him until he got it replaced; his father’s sudden death; his mismatched marriage.

“There were things for which it is impossible to prepare but which one spent a lifetime looking back at, trying to accept, interpret, comprehend. Things that should never have happened, that seemed out of place and wrong, these were what prevailed, what endured, in the end.” (TN 287)

All these experiences make Gogol a totally disheartened, yet matured individual. He is the representative of the identity crisis felt by most diaspora children who are born in foreign countries, but have the heavy distress and painful knowledge and longing for a lost world.

During Ashima’s final Christmas party, before her departure for Calcutta, Gogol retires quietly to his room to read the book of Nikolai Gogol. For the first time he reads his father’s writing in it:

“For Gogol Ganguli,” it says on the front endpaper in his father’s tranquil hand, in red ballpoint ink, the letters rising gradually, optimistically, on the diagonal toward the upper right-hand corner of the page. “The man who gave you his name, from the man who gave you your name” is written within quotation marks. (TN 288)

Gogol’s is a classical case of identity crisis, which they share and suffer from. Though the very Indian part of him was less recognized during his childhood, it became more and more evident during his youth like himself, others around were interested in his twin name, appearance and existence. In The Namesake, it is his life
that becomes a reflection of the uncomfortable, bleak and existential way of life of the diasporans.

The character of Gogol can be linked to Jhumpa Lahiri herself. Even though both of them maintain ethnic identity, their self identification as immigrants has faded. However, unlike Jhumpa Lahiri Gogol, with his strange name, feels insecurity both in his homeland and host land. As the novel ends, however, Gogol learns that the answer is not to fully abandon or attempt to diminish either culture, but to mesh the two together. Gogol is not fully in tune with his identity until he realizes that it is embellished by both cultures. He does not have to be one or the other; he does not have to choose. He is made up of both, and instead of weakening his pride is strengthened by this. Though the novel wraps up with more downfalls occurring in Gogol's life, he is able to stand on his feet. He is no longer ashamed of himself or the way he has lived. The dynamics of relationships continue to puzzle Lahiri as the characters in their multiplicity of relationships, be it from the west or the east, remain universally the same. However, quest for the self remains the central concern in the daunting novel as she interprets various maladies that Gogol suffered and the way he seeks remedial measures.

Thus, despite his attempts of reframing his identity and individuality, despite his derision towards his parents’ cultural heritage, despite his indifference to filial responsibilities, yet we find him de-cocooning himself from the intense psychological conundrum he confines himself into, sharing and attempting to re-nurture a bond of interconnectedness with his father, in his absentia, with Gogol and The Overcoat again provides a vital link and imparts a fresh meaning to his life and identity.
IV. Immigrant Psyche and Dilemma of Identity in

*Unaccustomed Earth*

The consistent dilemma of the fascination of the west and the innate bonding with the native traditions constitutes the fabric of the psyche of immigrants and subsequently their identity dwindles in the enigma of past and present. For the first generation immigrants, the challenges of exile, the loneliness, the constant sense of alienation, the knowledge of and longing for a lost world, are more explicit and distressing than for their children. On the other hand, the problem for the children of the immigrants – those with the strong ties to their motherland – is that they feel neither one thing nor the other. This makes the world of Jhumpa Lahiri very complex and heterogeneous which depicts different spheres of immigrant psyche and issues of identity. In *Unaccustomed Earth*, published on April 1, 2008, Lahiri continues to explore the theme of the cultural dissonances experienced by immigrants caught between the culture of their Indian birthplace and the unfamiliar ways of their adopted home, this time with a focus on the lives of second-generation immigrants who must navigate both the traditional values of their immigrant parents and the mainstream American values of their peers. Lahiri says about this new book:

“As opposed to the first collection, I worked on many of the stories for years while they kept evolving and evolving and evolving.”

(Lahiri 2008)

*Unaccustomed Earth* like her other books is also a reflection of life of two separate cultures and how people cope with each other. It achieved the rare distinction of debuting on the New York Times best sellers list in the number one slot. *New York Times* book review editor Dwight Garner stated,

“It’s hard to remember the last genuinely serious, well-written work of fiction- particularly a book of stories – that left straight to number one, it’s a powerful demonstration of Lahiri’s new found commercial clout”. (Garner 2007)

The title story “Unaccustomed Earth” is the first story of the collection *Unaccustomed Earth*. The story is about Ruma and her father, who retired from his
pharmaceutical company after his wife’s death. Ruma lives in Seattle with her workaholic white husband Adam and biracial son Akash. When the story starts we come to know that her single father is about to visit their home for the first time and Ruma is distressed by the possibility that he might decide to live with them permanently. But she also knows that her father needs no care and at the end of the story, she realizes that he is not accustomed to her world, he likes to live it on his own. Her father, who, like most of the book’s male characters, is strikingly, multidimensional, has his own worries. Her father came to visit her and was affectionate to her son but he thinks that he does not belong here.

He has started dating a Bengali Indian woman, Mrs. Bagachi, who was a widow and lived on long island. “Meenakshi was her name, and though he used it now when he addressed her, in his thoughts he continued to think of her as Mrs. Bagachi” (UE 9). Her father was painstakingly ponders upon divulging these details of their relationship to his daughter. He was doubtful of what her daughter’s reaction would be thus he tried to hide the fact. On his way back he lost the postcard he wrote for his newly found friend which falls into Ruma’s hand and she realizes that her father never intended to stay with them permanently.

Throughout the story we feel that Ruma is continuously missing her mother. Although there is a strong feeling towards her dead mother and continuous remembering when her father came to visit her they both enjoyed an unexpectedly blissful week together along with her son Akash. As far as this title story is concerned Lahiri has created a gripping tale. Despite this unending bleakness—or perhaps because of it Lahiri’s writing is usually compelling. She is conscious about dialogues and there is space for imaginative descriptions.

The second story of this collection is entitled “Hell-Heaven”. This is a girl-narrator’s reminiscence of her young days in Boston. Her name is Usha. She conjures up the socio-cultural alienation that has burdened her mother. It recounts her family’s relationship with a Bengali new comer Pranab Chakraborty. Usha the girl narrator in the story looks back at her mother’s initial attachment to Pranab who’s studying at MIT. “He brought to my mother the first and, I suspect, the only pure happiness she ever felt” (UE 62). Usha’s mother left heartbroken when Pranab decides to marry a
white woman Deborah. Usha not only tries to explore her mother’s psychological ups and downs but also makes objective comments on the past incidents.

Pranab was like a breath of fresh air to her mother’s life whose husband in effect has been married to his profession. But this sudden and unexpected happiness remains short-lived as Deborah enters into Pranab’s life. Later Deborah becomes his faithful wife, in spite of Usha’s mother’s adverse prediction. The tale concludes with the divorce of Deborah and Pranab after fourteen years of conjugal life as Pranab now runs after a married Bengali woman.

Usha grows up amid these relational variations and despite of her affinity to their cultural roots, she starts picking up the American way of life causing much anxiety to her mother, the conventional preserver of cultural purity. This story gives vent to schism that has been developing between these two generations. Usha’s increasing fondness for Deborah over her mother is suggestive of her adherence to the mainstream culture. Like any other white American child, she very often demands privacy, freedom and non-interference in her life and becomes defiant if these are denied. The more her mother puts restrictions on her, the more she finds pleasure in disobeying her:

I began keeping other secrets from her, evading her with the aid of my friends. I told her I was sleeping over at a friend’s when I went of parties, drinking beer and allowing boys to kiss me and fondle my breasts and press their erections against my hip as we lay groping on a sofa or a back seat of a car. (UE 76)

This is probably the effect of popular club culture encouraging among the second generation Indian American girls. This may also be interpreted as a reaction to the first generation immigrants’ oppressive effort to impose the ethnic culture where sex is a moral taboo. But there is hardly any doubt that it has emerged as a very common youth culture among the Americans.

“A Choice of Accommodations” is third story of this collection. The story illustrates the details about a married couple Amit and his white wife Megan and their two bi-racial daughters Maya and Monika. The story revolves around Amit and Megan and their relationship which was gradually deteriorating after the birth of their
second daughter. Amit and Megan decided on spending some time together without their children. Pam Bordem’s, a college friend of Amit, wedding gave them a chance to live alone for some days. They left their daughters with Megan’s parents and went to attend the marriage ceremony. The marriage was to take place at Langford academy, a boarding school where Pam’s father was headmaster, and from where Amit has graduated before eighteen years. At Langford Amit was the only Indian student. During his stay in Langford at the end of the day there was no escape for him as he desperately missed his parents who went to Delhi leaving him there alone. “He was crippled with homesickness, missing his parents to the point where tears filled his eyes” (UE 96). But gradually he learned to live without them.

During Pam’s wedding one of the guests Felicia talked to Amit about her and Jared’s wedding plans. When she asked Amit about his and Megan’s marriage he explained “we eloped eight years ago.” It was during their conversation about Amit’s marriage that he accepted the fact that “actually it was after the second (child) that our marriage sort of “- disappeared” (UE 113-114). He felt that though she (Megan) lived in the apartment, she slept in his bed, her heart belong to no one but him and the girls, and yet there were times Amit felt as alone as he had first been at Langford. And there were times he hated Megan simply for this.

He left Megan alone in the party and came to the hotel room, without even telling her. When she reached the hotel room, in the morning he was sleeping and all this made her annoyed of him. Next day they had to go for a brunch on campus, organized by Pam. But when they reached at Standish hall they come to know that the brunch ended before they came. The arrangement of the room was familiar to him but things had been redone since his time here. Megan asked him about his relation with pam. He replied “It was nothing Meg. We were friends and for a while I had a crush on her but nothing happened” (UE 125). The information fell between them, was valuable for years to share but he’d kept it from her, negligible now that he’d told her, and this was a renewal of their tiresome relationship which he was desperately living. They made love and the differences between them came to an end leading to a new start.

Death and mourning permeates most of the stories in this collection, including the three linked ones in the final section, but Lahiri’s most successful piece, “Only
Goodness‖, fourth story of this collection, isn’t quite so funereal. Sudha, a Bengali-American graduate student at LSE, receives an unexpected letter from her estranged alcoholic brother Rahul. Sudha was elated by the note, but the reunification with her brother throws her relationship with her English husband as well as her infant son’s safety into peril.

Years ago when Rahul had been in his junior year of high school, Sudha introduced him to alcohol. Rahul was her younger brother. They both used to drink in Rahul’s room. Sudha was again in high school at that time and gradually acquainted the habit of disobeying her parents. Though after sometime she had given up all her bad habits and started concentrating on her studies but Rahul was incapable of leaving this bad habit of drinking. This led his life towards complete destruction. He dropped out of his school and was arrested for two times for being underage while driving and that too being completely drunk. When it happened for the second time his license was cancelled. With the passage of time his attitude towards his parents kept on become harsh. His grades were gradually falling in studies.

Sudha was now living in London and now she was going to do a course as she explains “LSE had one of the best programs in developmental economics that she was thinking of doing NGO work” (UE 133). Here she met Roger Featherstone, wandering through National Gallery who had a PhD in art history. He had been married in his twenties to a girl he’d known at Cambridge; after two years she left him. Sudha decided to marry him. After some years, Sudha’s son Neel was born. Being unaware of his birth, Rahul sent a letter to Sudha to which Sudha replied through a letter telling him about her son. When Rahul came to meet them she found out that he has left his drinking habit from years and he was very happy with Neel. One day Rahul suggested to both Roger and Sudha to go for a movie together leaving Neel, her ten months child with him, so that they will be able to spend some time together. When he insisted they went for movie but she was aware of Rahul’s habit and she never told Roger about Rahul’s arrest. Sudha was completely nervous and worried about Neel.

When they came back home they didn’t listen any sound from any of the two. It was late at night. When she searched she found that Neel was alone in the bath tub. He was sitting without the plastic ring they normally put him in so that he wouldn’t
tip over. Rahul was nowhere around. They found Rahul in Roger’s study, drunk and asleep. This whole incident threw up her relationship with her husband Roger. This story towers over other in the collection not only because of Lahiri’s skillfulness, but also because the author liberates her writing from the simplistic cultural baggage. She allows her characters to breathe as individuals. What the characters in “Only Goodness” have in common with the rest of Lahiri’s universe, however, is the fact that they all inhibit the most elite culture of North American society. Many of her characters are immigrants or are involved in intra-racial romances. They go to Harvard and expensive boarding schools; they study at Columbia’s Butler library and discuss Homer. They are doctors and academics – apart from Bengali housewives.

“Nobody’s Business” is the fifth and last story of the first part of the book as the division of chapters is in two parts. Sangita, a second generation Bengali-Indian immigrant, is the chief protagonist of this story. Though her name is Sangita Biswas she loves to be called as Sang. Sang is of marriageable age. Therefore every so often men called for her with the desire to marry her. She studied philosophy and graduated from New York University. She was getting her doctorate at Harvard University. But she dropped out after a semester and was working part time at a book store.

Paul and Heather are Sang’s housemates who always tell her when there was a prospective groom on the phone. Once her boyfriend was standing on the side walk with Sang, looking up at the house he said “keep away from the window. When you change your clothes,” Paul heard him say. “I see through the windows.” (UE 185) Paul observed that her boyfriend wore perfectly faded jeans, a white shirt, a navy blue blazer, and brown leather shoes. His name was Farouk as Sang introduced him to Paul but he went for Freddy.

Paul observed that “suddenly Sang was never at home, when she was, stayed in her room, often on phone, the door shut” (UE 185). It was something of a shock to find Farouk in the house. Whenever she was not with Farouk, she did things for him. She used to read through proves of the articles he’d written, checking it for typographical errors. She scheduled his doctor’s appointment etc.

During one winter break when she went away to London to see her sister and her baby boy, a woman called at their house several times to know about Sang. She
asked to Paul whether Sang and Freddy are cousins. And began crying when she stopped crying she said that “she love him” (UE 193). She told him that she is Freddy’s girlfriend. When Deirdre asked again about whether Sang and Farouk are cousins? Paul told her the reality that they are boyfriend and girlfriend. When Sang was back she asked Paul about Deirdre, he told her everything. Now she started avoiding him, she blamed Paul of making all these stories about what he told her about Deirdre. Paul didn’t say anything to Sang. One day he finds out Deirdre’s number and called her and left a message on the answering machine, asked her to call him back. When she picked up the phone she said she will call him later the same night at ten. Then the idea came to him immediately, he brought a phone and an adopter with two jacks.

When Sang came home Paul told her that he called Deirdre and she will call him at ten o’clock and if she wants to listen she can listen without her knowing as he has hooked up another phone to their line, and she agreed. Exactly one minute past ten, both the phone rang. They slowly picked up both the phones. Deirdre told that she made Paul into a liar because it was Freddy’s idea; he was furious because she called Paul. He refused to see her and talk to her. She said that Paul should tell everything about Freddy to Sang because she has the right to know that she is not the only girl in Freddy’s life. Next morning Paul woke up on the noise of a car, Sang was going to London. She left a note on the kitchen table which said, “Paul thanks for yesterday.” Farouk called many times to know about Sang and Paul told him that she left the country. At the end we come to know that Paul has passed his exams and two of his professors took him to the Four Season Bar for drink and celebrate. After celebration when he moved out he saw Farouk and a woman. He directly looked at Farouk and thought: “for this man, Deirdre had called a perfect stranger; made fool of herself. For this man Sang would rush from the house, had refused all her suitors” (UE 218).

Second part of this story collection is entitled as “Hema and Kaushik” which consists of three stories interlinked with each other. The main theme of all the three stories is related with the main protagonists Hema and Kaushik and their life, and family. While dealing with this part of the collection Unaccustomed Earth (2008) Lahiri has changed her style of writing. The entire story is based on two people Hema and Kaushik who were once mere acquaintances in childhood; with a big difference in
their life style. Two decades after they met again, just days before they were going to enter into completely different phases of their life and yet felt attracted to each other. Then they went separate ways, and stayed separate for a lifetime.

The first of the three stories, “Once in a Life Time” unravels the interaction between two Indian immigrant families from the point of view of a thirteen years old girl, Hema. The story goes seven years back to a farewell party hosted by Hema’s parents for another Bengali family, that of Dr. Choudhuri who decided “to move all the way back to India. Hema, like Lilia in Interpreter of Maladies and many other second-generation Indians, is caught between insider-outsider syndromes. She is well accustomed to the American way of life which she maintains in the public sphere. Robin E. Field in his essay, “Writing the Second-generation: Negotiating Cultural Borderlands in Lahiri’s Works”, analyses the predicament of this generation. The influence of American culture is obvious in their lifestyle and they rarely subscribe to the polarized cultural identities their parents bear. This does not mean that they are completely out of touch with their ancestral lineage. Their physical closeness and familial interaction with their parents as well as their occasional visits to the parental hometown creates in them a sense of familiarity with their parents’ culture. This, according to Field, facilitates the condition of being at ease with ‘two homelands’ on the one hand and causes them to suffer from ‘dual alienation’ on the other. They feel a gradual physical and psychological distance from the obligatory cultural rites they need to perform at home or in the community festivals. Again this second-generation is yet to be considered as ‘real’ Americans due to their ‘visible colour’ in a country implicitly dominated by white citizens.

In the story, Hema is too young to understand this ‘pernicious system of racial difference’ but she knows that the boy for whom she nurtures secret infatuation was and would remain unaware of her existence. Lahiri is aware of the gulf that separates the two worlds that the children of immigrant encounter in their daily life. The narrative reaches its pinnacles when Mr. and Mrs. Choudhuri and their sixteen years old son, Kaushik return to America to resettle and put up at Hema’s house. Hema, in contrast to her parents, begin to silently appreciate their acculturation to American lifestyle in spite of their long stay in India. Such an attitude is palpable in the members of the second generation which results from proximity to the mainstream
culture Education in ‘American’ schools initiates them to a cultural world that is overtly different from the one they find in the Bengali community. Unlike Lahiri’s other child characters such as Usha in “Hell-Heaven”, Gogol, Moushumi and Sonia in *The Namesake* (2003), Hema is not much rebellious in spirit, she is rather very submissive. She observes how Kaushik, just three years older than her, goes beyond the control of his parents. She envies him for this fact. She represents those second generation Indian American adolescents who balance between dual pressures: the pressure for Americanization and of retaining the ancestral culture.

The second story of this part of the *Unaccustomed Earth* is entitled as “Year’s End”. This part of story is from Kaushik’s point of view, about his life after his mother’s death due to cancer and how that has changed his as well as his father’s life. He was devastated by his mother’s death and his father’s second marriage which has stumbled his relationship with his father, his newly step-mother and her two daughters.

Lahiri silently depicted the affectionate relationship between Kaushik and his little step-sisters, and how one day it washed away, leaving Kaushik wandering off to different places. He drives north ward, aimlessly towards the desolate, craggy country near the Canadian border. After journeying through pine forests and contemplating ocean that was the most unforgiving things, he’s able to sense an elusive power, a power he believes his diseased mother now possesses. For Kaushik the great American wilderness is a kind of temple.

The last part of this section “Going Ashore” is depicted by both of them: Hema and Kaushik as they met again in Italy after two long decades. Here Hema is tormented with her dishonest married Boyfriend Julian and her parents trying to get her back into family life by planning her marriage to Navin, a man she hardly knows, while Kaushik planning to travel different places in the world as part of his work of photography. In spite of all that they felt reattached and spend their days together, even though Hema is going to be married very soon.

Lahiri’s stories are about ‘exile’, about people living far away from home or moving to a new home. In her earlier works the focus was generally on Bengali moving to America but *Unaccustomed Earth* is often about people moving to new
place within America or characters going to London, Italy and all over the world. What Lahiri thinks of putting people in new physical circumstances is, as she says:

“It interests me to imagine characters shifting from one situation and one location to another for whatever the circumstances may be. In the first collection, characters were all moving far more or less the same reason (which was also the reason my parents came to United States): For opportunities or a job. In this collection there’s a similar pattern of movements but the reasons are more personal, somehow- they’re reasons of family dynamics or death in the family of things like that. In this book I spend more time with characters who are not immigrants themselves but rather the offspring of immigrants, I find that interesting because when you grow up the child of an immigrant you are always-or at least. I was very conscious of what it means or might mean to be uprooted or to uproot yourself. One is conscious of that without even having ever done it. I knew what my parents had gone through - not feeling rooted.” (Chotiner 2008)

Diasporic literature like immigrant literature mirrors a ‘double vision’ at once of ‘yearning backward’ and ‘looking forward’. Jhumpa Lahiri’s fiction too reflects this return to the past through memory. Her first generation Indian-Americans often confirm this ‘yearning backward’ with their recurring sense of loss and longing of displacement and nostalgia for their native land. Rushdie seems to endorse and advance this thinking in his own specific context when he opines that writers “remake the past, using memory as tool, “and adds that while leaning on memory, the writer exercise his imagination and creates a ‘new memory.” While Jhumpa Lahiri’s first-generation Indian-Americans cherish their past and its memories as an indispensible, integral part of their roots and their being. Her second-generation Indian-Americans reflect both proximity and distancing from it; as it seems in Unaccustomed Earth; the characters seem to perceive and adopt ‘new angles at which to enter this reality.’ More particularly and naturally too since they are born and raised in America, they ‘look forward’ to the concerns and modes of their hybridization and cross-cultural fertilization in the increasingly multicultural space of the USA, and not more absorption in the dominant culture. They refuse to be marginalized as the ‘other’ and
‘anonymous’. In this way, these stories mark a gradual transformation in the psyche of immigrants.

Jhumpa Lahiri’s narratology unfolds the complexity of diasporic life in terms of variations and diversities as also the contrasts and contradictions of human experience. The language she uses is relaxed and sparkling, and carries nuanced notations of layered significances and enriched meanings with effortless ease. She depicts not merely the uprootedness of her diasporic characters from their homeland and their loneliness in an alien geographical location, but also indicates that one’s home is wherever one lives or has lived; in the present case, the USA. In almost all her stories there is a longing for the native land, the life led in India before their migration to the US. Even the second-generation settlers are not free from the connection they have with the country of the birth of their parents. Politically and nationally they are Americans but the ‘added baggage’ of their parents’ memories of their country is something that they have to contend with. The first-generation settlers fear that the children may forget the traditions and culture of their parents and become completely Americanized. Thus they have to keep alive the traditions of their forefathers in the “Little-India” that they create in their apartments. The occasional visits to India also keep them in touch with their ‘roots’ and the magic that India possesses keeps them bound to her.

The second-generation members of the community who, according to the sociologist Alejandro Portes, are “native-born children of immigrant parents and children born abroad who came at a very early age,” suffer from existential crisis. Lahiri evokes the layered tension in the experiences of the first and second-generation Indian Americans arising out of their divided affiliations towards their original and adopted homelands. Her characters, portrayed in this short-story collection, act as interpreters of both the Indian culture and the culture of the United States. As a sensitive American writer, well aware of and closely linked with Indian heritage, Lahiri unfolds her characters’ fractured double perspectives.

In Unaccustomed Earth, Lahiri’s fictional interpretation of the immigrant situation, their psyche and dilemma of their identity carries authenticity because it reflects her keen observation and understanding of the characters caught between their traditional past and the modern present. Lahiri’s characters, located as they are at the
intersection of Indian and western cultures, struggle to survive in the baffling new world where the old relationship and old modes and manners are out of place.

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