Chapter I

Introduction

Indian English literature has become one of the most powerful and characteristic modes of expression. The early twentieth century saw the advent of British writers like Rudyard Kipling, Jim Cobert and George Orwell who took up Indian themes and sentiments but portrayed them in British style. But the writers like Kamala Markandaya, Anita Desai, Ruth PrawerJhabwala, Bharati Mukherjee, Shobha De and Arundhati Roy capture the Indian experiences skillfully in their own but different styles. The English language has attained a refinement in their effortless usage. These post-colonial women writers project the dreams and desire of Indian women and have acquired fame and become dominant in the postcolonial India through their literary feat.

The tradition of Indian Writing has travelled a long way from the writers such as Rabindranath Tagore and Vijayalakshmi Pandit to Shashi Deshpande, Sunetra Gupta, Jhumpa Lahiri and Rupa Bajwa. It has crossed many stages of evolution from nationalism, socialism, humanism, and feminism to a totally new area called “diaspora writing.”
The word “diaspora” is derived from the Greek term “disperian”. ‘Dia’ means ‘across’ and ‘sperian’ means ‘to sow or scatter seeds’. The term ‘diaspora’ now refers to displaced communities which have been dislocated from their homeland through migration or immigration or exile. “Diaspora” is used as an umbrella term to refer to all such movements and dislocations from the native country or culture. Since being diasporic is a matter of personal choice, the journey of life becomes an exploration of individuals’ sense of ‘self’ and a quest for the liberations of the human spirit.

The term also refers to the voluntary or forcible movement of people from their traditional ethnic homelands into new regions. This involves the temporary or permanent dispersion and settlement of millions of people throughout the world. It is separate from the nomadic culture and more appropriately linked with the creation of a group of refugees. However, while refugees may or may not ultimately settle in a new geographic location, the term “diaspora” refers to permanently displaced and relocated collective.

Diaspora highlights the multiple standpoints born out of migration and exile. It illuminates an ambivalent politics of positioning and being positioned, of identification and being identified, a politics antithetical to ethnic and cultural essentialism. Displacement compels
the unpredictable and imaginative occupation of culture and identity and generates vibrant and creative ways of expressing these in cultural production. Stuart Hall observes:

The diaspora experience as intended here is defined, not by essence or purity, but by the recognition of a necessary heterogeneity and diversity; by a conception of ‘identity’ which lives with and through, not despite, difference; by hybridity. Diaspora identities are those which are constantly producing and reproducing themselves anew, through transformation and difference. (222-235)

In contemporary diaspora studies the term ‘diaspora’ has expanded its frame of reference to represent ‘exemplary’ cases of multiple and hybrid subjectivity for those whose identities have been disrupted by migration. It has come to epitomize our contemporary transnational, intercultural experience.

Robin Cohen describes “diaspora as communicates of people living together in one courtly who acknowledge that the old country a notion often buried deep in language, religion, custom of folklore always has some claim on their loyalty and emotions.” He continues that “a member’s adherence to a diasporic community is demonstrated by an acceptance of an inescapable link with their past migration history
and a sense of co-ethnicity with others of a similar background” (qtd. in Mcleod 207). A similar idea can be found in the argument of Avatar Brah. He says that diaspora communities are created out of the confluence of narratives of different journeys from the old country to the new, which create the sense of a shared history. (qtd. in Mcleod 207).

Diasporians live as a community together in the new country but acknowledge that the language, religion, custom and culture of the old country have a legitimate claim over their loyalty. These emotions make them experience displacement, fragmentation, marginalization and discontinuity in the cultural discourse. Diasporic communities establish new and different relations without losing their attachment to cultural roots, which is their major characteristic. The immigrant population is unable to leave their homeland and its culture though they are conspicuously away from it. They are inescapably Indian in their character. The immigrants are always bogged by the memories of their home country even as they are overwhelmed by the legitimacy of the new world.

This kind of cultural dichotomy is one challenge most of the women writers face. Kamala Markandaya settled in England was married to an Englishman. Ruth Pawer Jhabvala has a complex culture with Polish parentage. She was brought up in Germany,
educated in England and married to an Indian architect. Anita Desai had a German mother and a Bengali father, and next in the list are Bharati Mukherjee and Jhumpa Lahiri.

The themes of exile and diaspora which have been a focal point of most of Indian fiction. The Immigrant experience, the question of identity and the expatriate experience continue to create a scope for fiction and they all can be traced in the works of all South Asian women writers. “Exiles or emigrants or expatriates are haunted by some sense of loss, some urge to reclaim, to look back even at the risk of mutated in the pillars of salt” (Rushdie 75).

Jhumpa Lahiri fits neatly into the new age of East Indian writers of fiction which includes Arundhati Roy and Pankaj Mishra who break free from Rushdie’s magical realism and embraces truth. These diasporic writers give expression to their creative urge and express their longing for their motherland by portraying an objective picture of Indian society. The works of these writers consistently revolve around people who are caught in the act of juggling with multiple cultures.

Jhumpa Lahiri and Bharati Mukherjee, the daughters of Calcutta, are appropriately paired as representatives of East Indian voice in American fiction. Mukherjee takes up the response of the
expatriate immigrants of the various nationalities whereas Lahiri contemplates and illustrates sentiments of dislodgement in Indians, their intention to stick to the native culture, incorporate into their new home, and their affliction over ethical and emotional issues. She persists on the themes of love, matrimonial complexity, betrayal and estrangement.

Jhumpa Lahiri was born on July 11, 1967. She is a Bengali American author. Her father, Amar K Lahiri, is a Professor, Librarian at the University of Rhode Island and her mother, Tapati Lahiri, is a school teacher. Lahiri received a B.A. in English Literature at Barnard College, followed by receiving an M.A. in English, an M.F.A. in Creative Writing, an M.A. in Comparative Literature, and a Ph.D. in Renaissance Studies from Boston University. Lahiri worked as a research assistant with a non-government organization in Cambridge, Massachusetts. Gradually she interested herself in fiction writing. She earned four post graduate degrees in English, Creative Writing, Comparative Literature and Arts. Her two year fellowship at Fine Arts Work Centre in the Province town gave her more time for her literary work. At the age of thirty- four she married Alberto Vourvoulias-Bush, deputy editor of the Latin American edition of Time.
Lahiri’s cosmopolitan life is responsible for a dichotomy that is often present in her writing as her characters struggle with cultural identity. In her own words, in “My Two Lives” she says,

> When I first started writing I was not conscious that my subject was the Indian-American experience. What drew me to my craft was the desire to force the two worlds I occupied to mingle on the page as I was not brave enough, or mature enough, to allow in life. (10)

Though her education is not focused on women’s issues, her female characters, articulated through the relationships they are engaged in, be it as parents or girlfriends, are empowered uniquely in self-sufficient and self-reliant ways.

Jhumpa Lahiri is a significant writer of Indian diaspora who has enriched the corpus of international writing in English. Lahiri being an Indian by ancestry, British by birth and American by immigration has imbibed the multi cultural life style and this life style plays a central theme in many of her stories.

Lahiri’s debut collection, *Interpreter of Maladies* (1999) is a collection of nine short stories, reflecting different South Asian Communities. She received the Pulitzer for the collection in April 2000.
Her title story “Interpreter of Maladies” was selected for the O.Henry Award and for the Best American Short Stories. Lahiri depicts Indianness in an unusual foreign setting stuffed with Indian characters, food, costumes and habits. Her fiction is more reality than fancy weaving her characters admirably with a suppleness of a matured writer. This collection of short stories addresses sensitive dilemmas in the lives of Indians or Indian migrants, with the themes such as marital difficulties, miscarriages, and the disconnection between the first and the second U.S. immigrants. Her second book a full length novel which reflects her personal experiences was received with a great expectation after the success of her first collection of short stories. Lahiri in her work The Namesake (2003) grapples with characters that are caught between two worlds. They want to keep alive the memories of their homeland and preserve their heritage. She shows that the immigrants in their enthusiasm to stick to their own cultural beliefs and customs gradually imbibe the cultural ways of the host country too. Though immigrants and their children might adopt and assimilate the culture of the new country but they are not taken to be part of the host country. Their identity is related to the migrant history of their parents and grandparents.
Jhumpa Lahiri’s *The Namesake* is a culture-oriented, more precisely, a Bengali diasporic culture-oriented novel. As a diasporic novel it represents the diasporic themes like displaced, dislocated and determinitised feelings of the first generation expatriates like Ashima Ganguli, the female protagonist of the novel; assimilated, translational and transcultural tendency among the diasporic people, especially among the second generation immigrants in the novel like Gogol Ganguli, Sonali Ganguli and Moushumi Mazoomdar; a feeling of nostalgia towards the natal /imaginary homeland by the first generation expatriates like Ashima Ganguli; the community feeling among the diasporic people; the familial, human relationships within a diasporic family in a diasporic land and other traits. Ashima Ganguli moored in diasporic land with her feelings of rootlessness also finds routes to discover her at home in many homes in the world. The Bengali diasporic cultures are amalgamated dexterously in the texture of the novel.

Lahiri’s second collection of short stories and third book, *The Unaccustomed Earth*, comprises of eight stories continuing her introspection of expatriate immigrant Bengalis. Here she deals more with the second generation immigrants where some of the characters break the rules while some other returns to familiar grounds.
She also clearly explores the cultural issues and differences between the American born second generation Indians and their parents, who migrated to the U.S. in the 70’s-80’s.

Lahiri clearly shows how feminism as an established movement focused on cultural inequalities, reproductive rights and social disparities. However, she prefers the term “womanism” coined by Alice Walker to “feminism” since it is more inclusive of all aspects concerning the life of a woman. To contrast these terms, though the feminist movement fought for the suffrage of white women, it never got involved in the civil rights to help guarantee black women’s social equality. Hence, womanism looks out not only for women but also for the rights of women of colour, who are sometimes a step behind white women when it comes to social equality.

The term “womanism” emerged from Black feminist recognition of the ignorance of racial struggles in the first and second wave of feminism due to factors such as purposeful neglect, racism and perpetuation of the ‘white-women’s agenda’ (Alexander-Floyd and Simien 2006 N.pag.web). Several studies have found “that Black women are less likely than White women to identify as feminists….Therefore, although Black women may support the premises of the women’s movement, they may not ultimately identify with being feminist” (Boisnier 212).
Ultimately, womanism claims a different and more encompassing type of identification for Black women, which separates from the traditional notions of feminism.

Layli Phillips in "Womanism: On Its Own" argues:

Womanism is a social change perspective rooted in Black women's and other women of colours’ everyday experiences and everyday methods of problem solving in everyday spaces, extended to the problem of ending all forms of oppression for all people, restoring the balance between people and the environment/nature, and reconciling human life with the spiritual dimension. (xx)

Though womanism is a term that has a similar meaning to feminism but describes all women, career driven and not. Womanism is a term of wholeness that displays women of different ranges of age and cultures. This was not the case at first since the term was first used by Alice Walker, meaning womanism referring to black feminists. Now this term embodies the whole essence of a woman’s being and states. Many women feel a drawing to this term more than feminism because of stigmatism attached to it.
At its core, womanism is a social change perspective based upon the everyday problems and experiences of black women and other women of colour, but more broadly seeks methods to eradicate inequalities not just for black women, but for all women. The self-authored spirit of activism, spirituality, and the women's relationship with herself, other women, and her surroundings comprise an essential part of the ideology.

Womanism allows women to affirm and celebrate their colour and in a way that feminism does not. It characterizes women as willful and capable thereby contrasting the image of a woman as subservient and inferior. In doing so, it empowers women, and challenges them to break from the traditional definition of womanhood.

Looking at the history of the emergence of the term, a need for the term "womanism" arose during the early Feminist Movement, which was mainly led by middle-class white women advocating for social change in the form of women's suffrage. While the Feminist Movement focused on ending gender-based oppression, it largely ignored race and class-based oppression. The height of this academic discourse took place during the late 1980s when scholars such as Cleenora Hudson-Weems, and Chikwenye Okonjo Ogunyemi began to share their findings with the world. During this time, womanism was
embraced, debated, and dismissed by academics, mainly due to its perspective on the African-American experience. The 1990s presented a new kind of challenge with the proliferation of black feminism within women's studies. As a result, womanism fell beneath the radar of the public eye, but academic discourse progressed, and scholars continued to contribute to and explore the discipline. By the early 2000s, womanism had resurfaced as a unique social change perspective. This was further cemented by the publication of “The Womanist Reader” in 2006, a collection of womanist essays and critiques.

Author and poet Alice Walker first utilized the term "womanist" in her work, “In Search of our Mother's Gardens: Womanist Prose”. She explains that the term womanist is derived from the southern folk expression "acting womanish". The womanish girl exhibits willful, courageous, and outrageous behavior that is considered to be beyond the scope of societal norms. She then goes on to say that a womanist is:

A woman who loves another woman, sexually and/ or non sexually. She appreciates and prefers women's culture, women’s emotional flexibility...[she] is committed to the
survival and wholeness of an entire people, male and female. Not a separatist, except periodically for health... loves the spirit.... loves struggle, loves herself - Regardless. (8)

According to Walker, while feminism is incorporated into womanism, it is also instinctively pro-humankind. The focus of the ideology is not on gender inequality, but on race and class-based oppression. Walker's much cited expression, "womanist is to feminist as purple is to lavender" (7), suggests that feminism is a component beneath the much larger ideological umbrella of womanism. Walker's definition also holds that womanists are universalists. Although Walker is credited for the term, there are other contributors to the womanism movement. These contributors developed their own womanist theories independently of Walker's womanism.

Western ideals of womanism can differ from that of African and Asian cultures, and thus the ways in which women assert themselves as strong individuals can differ as well. A prime example of this transnational womanism can be found in the works of Jhumpa Lahiri. Her female characters often find themselves isolated and alone in a new country, or even alone within a marriage or relationship. The Namesake holds many examples of these quietly empowered and independent women. The female characters in Lahiri’s writing receive
much of their strength from motherhood, and are depicted largely as
mothering figures to the men in their lives as well as to their children.
In this way, they possess an understated power that is cognizant of
both Western strength and internationally diverse womanhood.

Lahiri writes portraits of women. Though in her shorter stories
the characters are not entirely developed, the women she writes about
are relatable and realistic. Her characters suffer emotional
complexities that most authors cannot capture, but her writing style
allows for difficult topics of conversation such as miscarriages,
divorce, immigration and cultural identity crises.

She examines societal constructs and their impact on the
actions of women. She is able to depict clashing cultures and their fusion
beautifully from a womanist standpoint. The overarching themes of
motherhood and personal discovery in Lahiri’s writing, combined with
her observations regarding the dichotomies between American and
Bengali lifestyles shed light on the intersections of humanity and
womanhood across societies.

Lahiri is a post-colonial writer. She has led an exceptional life in
her short thirty two years. She was born to Bengali Indian Parents in
London and moved to Rhode Island at a very young age. She later
moved and now resides in Greenwich Village in New York.
This colourful background has led her to a unique multicultural perspective. Her goal in writing she states is "a desire to be able to interpret between two cultures" (qtd. in Bahadur 1999 N.pag. web). Also, she succeeds in welding the theme of immigration and displacement to that of human relationships. She successfully explores the myriad landscape of human relationships against the backdrop of both geographical as well as emotional displacement. Her characters often exist simultaneously in two cultures: the American reality and the sphere of Indian Tradition. Lahiri depicts her characters evolving in the midst of a new hybrid culture, an Indo-American sensibility. This new age sensibility gives them a distinct identity in society.

Lahiri has made numerous visits to India and has witnessed the effects of colonialism that has occurred in her parent's native country. She has also researched the consequences of diaspora as it presently exists in India. The three ties that she has got with India, United States and England have instilled a sense of homelessness within Lahiri. This has led to her feeling as if she does not belong. She herself has said "that no country is my motherland. I always find myself in exile in whichever country that I travel to, that's why I was tempted to write something about those living their lives in exile" (qtd. in. Bahadur 1999 N.pag. web).
Lahiri has understood the characteristics of a typical Indian family. She knows that an Indian family is the most oppressive institution, and also that women's roles are defined solely in terms of others. The traditional roles for women are the child, adolescent, wife, daughter-in-law, mother, mother-in-law, and widow. At marriage, a woman often loses her identity and is referred to by her own parents as the "son-in-law's wife." In other sectors of Indian society, women change their first and last names to that of their husbands, obliterating their identity and sealing the husband's feudal-like ownership of his wife. The rare act of divorce is seen as a reflection on the woman, who is viewed as Westernized, amoral and unmindful of her duties as a good Indian woman and wife. The growth in the number of divorces in India is seen as either a sign of demoralization of Indians or as a sign of self-assertion and independence.

Lahiri lets her history and background resonates through her tales; she puts herself into each of the stories. This sense of autobiography can be felt in most of her stories. A reader can easily discover that she had a similar background to a character of hers and therefore many of her character's feelings and experiences become authenticated.
It is apparent that there is a great responsibility thrust upon post-colonial women writers. They have the task of bringing to light the realities and atrocities that exist in their dual cultures. Jhumpa Lahiri’s past is ever present while shaping her characters’ lives in different societies and cultures. Whether her tale takes place in India, the United States or England it is evident that her unique voice touches upon the issues that plague these civilizations. She gives a voice to women who have long been silenced by both men and their colonial societies.

The study views Indian diasporic womanism to have three key aspects: feminism, womanhood and motherhood. The shades of these three key aspects include double marginalization, patriarchal dominance, ideological pressures, gender inequality, gender discrimination, power relations, sexism, stereotyping, emancipation, sexuality, sacrifice, tolerance, acceptance, social and psychic pressures, forgiveness, courage, protection, possessiveness, love and care, understanding and tension and passive sufferings. These shades may be grouped into three. Under feminism, the shades such as double marginalization, patriarchal dominance, ideological pressures, gender inequality, gender discrimination and power relations may be included. Womanhood encompasses the four important shades such
as sexism, stereotyping, emancipation and sexuality. The third key aspect, “motherhood,” includes the shades such as sacrifice, tolerance, acceptance, social and psychic pressures, forgiveness, courage, protection, possessiveness, love and care, understanding, tension and passive sufferings. This attempt to classify the shades of Indian diasporic womanism will not forfeit the discussion of other features such as displacement, discontinuity, migration, adaptation, transformation, reinvention, cultural resilience, and diasporic consumption. These are also touched upon in the analysis of the works of Jhumpa Lahiri.

The next chapter reviews the diasporic experiences presented in the works of writers such as V.S. Naipal, Salman Rushdie and Bharathi Mukerjee.