CHAPTER 5

Celebrating Hybridity and Asserting Multicultural Identities: Jhumpa Lahiri and the New Ways of Looking at Diaspora

A constant change has taken place lately in the way people perceive diaspora. There has been an assorted and varied response to the generations of diasporic movements. Earlier diaspora was about displacement, a sense of loss, alienation wherein a diasporic subject engages in ritualistic act of longing for his homeland, sticking onto his native identity, culture, language and painfully assimilating himself into the new culture while pining for the old. But recently many second and third generation diaspora writers have let go off this conventional stereotyping of diaspora and have come up with new ways of looking at it. Sudesh Mishra in his essay “From Sugar to Masala: Writing by the Indian Diaspora” distinguishes between the first generation (Sugar) and the second generation (Masala) diaspora movements. He claims that while the old diaspora writers tend to concentrate on the inner experiences, the new diaspora writers focus “on the threshold zone of intercutting subjectivities that define the experience of migrancy” (287). Sunil Bhatia and Anjali Ram in their article “Culture, Hybridity, and the Dialogic Self” differentiate between old and new diaspora and says –

The new migrants invoke a different sort of picture than the old immigrants. Contemporary immigrants both create and transform social networks, circuits of capital and commodities, and cultural practices and rituals that exist in the country of their settlement and the home society. These immigrants travel back and forth
between dual societies, inhabit multiple homes, roles, identities, and language

(Sahoo and Maharaj 619)

Jhumpa Lahiri is one such writer, who through her writing has celebrated the idea of multiculturalism, hybridity and transnationalism. Belonging to the second generation diaspora, Lahiri has accepted herself as much ‘American’ as she is ‘Indian’. She is at ease with her ‘hyphenated’ identity. She claims for herself a hyphenated and hybrid identity. Her works engages in negotiating ways between identity, culture and history, and while doing so defines a whole new identity for herself and her characters. Jhumpa Lahiri in one of her interview says –

“It was always a question of allegiance, of choice. I wanted to please my parents and meet their expectations. I also wanted to meet the expectations of my American peers, and the expectation I put on myself to fit into American society. It’s a classic case of divided identity…” (Ray and Kundu 226)

As a second generation immigrant, Lahiri shuttled between Calcutta and Boston, and these travels she says has enhanced her literary imagination - “I went to Calcutta, neither as a tourist nor as a former resident - a valuable position I think, as a writer. I learned to observe things as an outsider and yet I also knew that, as different as Calcutta is from Rhode Island, I belong there in some fundamental way, in way I did not seem to belong in the United States” (Reddy 139). Lahiri’s fiction partially autobiographical and repeatedly draws upon the lives of her parents, friends, acquaintances, and others in the Bengali communities in Boston, a place where she grew up. This chapter focuses on Lahiri’s immigrant women characters in her short story collections Interpreter of Maladies (1999) and Unaccustomed Earth (2008) and tries to bring out the essential
changes that have come to diasporic writing and the subsequent characterization in the
wake of globalization and transnational movements.

With the subtitle “Stories of Bengal, Boston and Beyond” Lahiri brings home a
sense of universality to the immigrant experience which more or less is the same
anywhere. The stories, her first are mainly about the troubles faced by first generation
Indian immigrants in America, their perception of exile, their constant memories and
nostalgia, their inevitable sense of nowhere-ness that eventually leads to an existential
compromise, where they learn to live, assimilating and adapting. Though the stories
unfold in America (mainly Boston) in the background we see glimpses of India (Bengal)
evoked in memory and its recreation by the immigrants. Varied and yet comprehensive,
the stories range from that of estranged couples, a Bangladeshi immigrant, a lonely
housewife, a taxi driver cum tourist guide and so on. For the ease of analysis, the stories
can be clubbed together as tales that deal with marriage, family and relationships and the
ones that deal with immigrant issues. “When Mr. Pirzada Came to Dine”, “Mrs. Sen’s
and “The Third and Final Continent” taken collectively, form the most poignant first
generation immigrant tale.

Narrated through the eyes of a ten year old Indian girl Lilia, “When Mr. Pirzada
Came to Dine” is an emotionally evocative immigrant tale of Mr. Pirzada, an immigrant
from Bangladesh set in 1971. As a professor of botany, he came to Massachusetts to
study the foliage of New England. Though the story unfolds in the modest, Boston
apartment of an Indian couple where Mr. Pirzada is a frequent visitor, in the background
we see the horrors of the partition of Pakistan and Bangladesh in 1971. Worried about his
family back in Dacca Mr. Pirzada comes to Lilia’s house every evening to watch the
news on television to keep track on developments back home. Typical of an immigrant Mr. Pirzada evokes the memory of his family—his three storey house, his wife of twenty years, and seven daughters with pain and nostalgia. He always did a peculiar thing before eating hid dinner—“... (He) took out a plain silver watch without a band, which he kept in his breast pocket....Unlike the watch on his wrist, the pocket watch, he had explained to me, was set to the local time in Dacca, eleven hours ahead” (30). Edward Said in Reflections on Exile notes, “For an exile, habits of life, expression or activity in the new environment inevitably occur against the memory of these things in another environment. Thus both the new and the old environments are vivid, actual occurring together contrapuntally” (172). The tense situation of a war back home and the impending possibility of refugee crisis are foremost in his mind, he sadly utters “one can only hope...that Dacca’s refugees are as heartily fed” (29).

Lahiri has modeled Lilia’s parents to a large extent based on her own parents. Characteristic of Indian immigrants Lilia’s parents have a number of Indian acquaintance. “In search of compatriots, they 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. It was in this manner that they discovered Mr. Pirzada, and phoned him, and invited him to our home” (24).

Like all second generation immigrant, Lilia too is perplexed at her own Indian American identity and is confused as to where she belongs. Born in America, she is more American in her ways, with American friends she celebrates Halloween and is at ease with the white society. Her own identity comes into question when she understands the plurality of identity which Mr. Pirzada possesses. Though her father complains that his
daughter doesn’t know much of India’s history her mother is glad she is in America, which puts her in a much better position when compared to Mr. Pirzada’s daughters:

She (mother) seemed genuinely proud of the fact [that I was American], as if it were a reflection of my character. In her estimation, I knew, I was assured a safe life, an easy life, a fine education, every opportunity. I would never have to eat rationed food, or obey curfews, or watch riots from my rooftop, or hide neighbours in water tanks to prevent them from being shot, as she and my father had. (27)

For the young Lilia Mr. Pirzada was “the Indian Man” (23) which her father corrected “Not since partition. Our country was divided in 1947” (23). She could not distinguish what made him different from her own parents as for her they looked similar, ate same food, spoke the same language. The similarity Lilia sees in her parents and Mr. Pirzada shows that for a child, persons are not classified by religion, race or nationality. For her the friendship shared by her parents and Mr. Pirzada is based on common practices, a shared Bengali culture, which is beyond the politics of religion and national boundaries. Mr. Pirzada’s predicament is that of a dangling man who does not have an identity of his own. After the partition he is no more an Indian, neither a Pakistani and provided the conditions in Dacca, not yet a Bangladeshi.

Intrigued by her father’s explanation of Indian history, Lilia tries to know more about it through books in her library. Her American teacher Mrs. Kenyon sees no reason for her to consult the book titled “Pakistan: A Land and its People”, and asks her to put it back. Lilia’s parents, first generation immigrants refer to India as their real home. But
Lilia, being a second generation is twice removed from the homeland. Not inheriting the cultural baggage of the original home, Lilia is not tied to an exact place, not Indian neither fully American. For her India is just an ‘imaginary homeland’. She is the resident of a third space, where the cultures of India and America meet; a liminal space in which many second generations like her dwell. After Mr. Pirzada knew about the war that has started between India and Pakistan, he left for Dacca. A post card that Lilia’s parents received months later announced the well being of his family. The story closes with Lilia’s musing of how for the first time she felt the absence of Mr. Pirzada that sums up the immigrant sensibility in the story - “It was only then, raising my water glass in his name, that I knew what it meant to miss someone who was so many miles and hours away, just as he had missed his wife and daughters for so many months” (42).

“Mrs. Sen’s” is an immigrant tale centered on the life of the title character Mrs. Sen, a lonely Bengali housewife of a mathematics professor at the university. According to Susan Ram “in this beautifully observed story, East meets west in the shared experience of loneliness and the poignancy of Mrs. Sen’s situation is handled with utmost delicacy and control unsullied by any hint of mawkishness” (n.pag.).

With the coming of Eliot an eleven year old American boy whom she looks after, she hopes to ward off her loneliness and boredom, she had put the ad “Professor’s wife, responsible and kind, I will care for your child in my home” (111). The story focuses on Mrs. Sen’s life on a day to day basis, which largely revolves around cutting vegetables and preparing fish. Eliot is amused at her manners, which is in sharp contrast to that of his working and sophisticated American mother who is too critical about Mrs. Sen. He looked with surprise at her manners – the way she applied scarlet powder to her forehead,
the blade she used to cut vegetables instead of a knife, the amount of food she prepared for herself and her husband that smelled of cumin and other spices. In every possible way and with little available at her disposal, she tries to create home away from home in her modest apartment in America through imagination –

This disjunction between past and present, between here and there, makes ‘home’ seem far removed in time and space, available to return only through the act of imagination....In this formulation, home becomes primarily a mental construct built from the incomplete odds and ends of memory that survive from the past. It exists in a fractured, discontinuous relationship with the present (McLeod 211)

Lahiri has created Mrs. Sen based on her own mother. In an interview with Vibhuti Patel she says “Mrs. Sen is based on my mother who baby sat in our home. I saw her one way but imagined that an American child may see her differently reacting with curiosity, fascination and fear to things I took for granted” (N.pag.)

Eliot soon finds out that Mrs. Sen is not happy with her American life – “Here, in this place where Mr. Sen has brought me, I cannot sometimes sleep in so much silence” (115). With little interaction with neighbours or other people around she becomes lonely and misses her home – “At home that is all you have to do. Not everybody has a telephone. But just raise your voice a bit, or express grief or joy of any kind, and one whole neighbourhood and half of another has come to share the news, to help with arrangements” (116). Perplexed by the idea of privacy and individualism that Americans uphold she is forced to ask Eliot “if I began to scream right now at the top of my lungs, would someone come?” (116). Eliot replies “they might call you....But they might
complain that you were making too much noise" (117). She thinks that once she receives her driving license it might improve her current predicament a bit. With freedom of movement assured she fantasizes – “Could I drive all the way to Calcutta?” (119). Sarah Kerr’s observation about Lahiri’s women in general is aptly suitable for Mrs. Sen:

As the men went for their advanced degrees in fields like engineering and microbiology and stayed on to take jobs, young women from India flew over to accompany them, sometimes following through on an arranged marriage. Once here, in the early days, the wives had little besides frugal homemaking to occupy the endless hours they spent alone. They suffered terribly at first from loneliness, and from the devastating absence of anything they could recognize from their youth. (n.pag.)

Like Mr. Pirzada, Mrs. Sen is happy about two things - one is the letter from her family that comes all the way from Calcutta “it was her custom to check the mailbox....At first Eliot found Mrs. Sen’s anxiety incomprehensible; his mother had a P.O box in town, and she collected mail so infrequently that once electricity was cut off for three days’ (121). And the other thing is fresh fish which she liked to cook - “it is very frustrating...to live so close to the ocean and not have so much fish...she had grown up eating fish twice a day...in Calcutta people ate fish first thing in the morning, last thing before bed, as a snack after school if they were lucky” (123). Food is sometimes the greatest marker of one’s identity. This is an immigrants attempt to transport the feel of her homeland to her adopted land. The fish more than just being a food item helps her to feel one with her culture her culinary habits. Diasporic movements should not just be judged by the physical displacement the diasporic subjects undergo but the term connotes to an entirely
of her husband, her apartment and Eliot. Eliot’s mother seems to be the only American woman with whom Mrs. Sen has talked for a while. Mrs. Sen’s experiences are true to immigrant women belonging to the first generation. Indira Nityanandam opines

“Mrs. Sen’s” portrays the culture shock of both Mrs. Sen and Eliot. The cultural transplant takes no roots on the new soil. In fact Mrs. Sen makes no effort to forget her Indian past....Till the end of the story, Mrs. Sen remains poised between the two worlds- the one she left behind and the one she lives in, with ever widening chasm between the two. Tears and loneliness become the permanent features of her life. (42-43)

The story “The Third and Final Continent” for the large part sums up Lahiri’s major arguments. Written in form of memories of the past as it is recollected by the unnamed narrator and protagonist, we see multiple displacements and initial troubles of a young immigrant who later successfully assimilates and emerges triumphant. The narrator left India as a young man in the year 1964. He stayed in London as a penniless Bengali bachelor along with many others like him before moving to Boston, Massachusetts. It’s during his short stay as a tenant at old Mrs. Croft house that he comes to know about the differences and about the peculiarities of his own identity. Mrs. Croft, an old woman almost 103 years old, independent and ferocious lived all alone in her house. Still refusing to part with the glory of yesteryears, she takes pride in being a white woman. She is particular about renting her room “only Harvard and Tech in this house” (179), since she feels that they are well behaved and elite, suiting her status. What mattered to her most was that “There is an American flag on the moon....A flag on the
moon, boy! I heard on the radio! Isn’t that splendid?” (179). She kept on repeating the same thing every evening when he met her.

In spite of her eccentricities and hostile nature, the narrator had immense respect for her. After knowing more about her life through her sixty eight year old daughter Helen, he admired her strength to live for another forty years after her husband’s death and courage at this age which prompted her to live independently all alone in the house. She was in contrast with the narrator’s own mother – “it was widowhood that had driven my own mother insane….My mother refused to adjust to life without him; instead she sank deeper into a world of darkness from which neither I, nor my brother, nor concerned relatives nor psychiatric clinic on Rashbihari Avenue could save her” (187).

Having married a young Bengali woman, the narrator waits for the arrival of his wife, who is yet to get the visa and Green Card. He slowly starts assimilating into the new culture – “I was used to it all by then: used to cornflakes and milk” (190). His wife, a typical Bengali woman has problems at first. She confronts cultural shocks, and keeps on covering her head with her sari even when at home alone with her husband. She experiences alienation, and they both seem like strangers to each other – “The marriage had been arranged by my (narrator’s) older brother and his wife. I regarded the proposition with neither objection nor enthusiasm. It was a duty expected of me, ....I was told that she could cook, knit, embroider, sketch landscapes, and recite poems by Tagore...”(181).

Even though he leads his own life in a different apartment, he somehow feels the need to visit Mrs. Croft along with his wife. The bond that the Indian man forms with the
old American lady is unique in its own way. Her presence at the initial stages of his settlement in Boston and their friendship helps him to adjust and endure initial difficulties. The alienation his wife feels at Mrs. Croft’s place draws him closer to her, even though its sympathy. Mrs. Croft is for him in a way his first family, even before his wife arrives and it is because of it that he says “Mrs. Croft was the first death I mourned in America, for hers was the first life I had admired” (196). Shifting to the present, the narrator is old now. Having assimilated into American soil he feels proud –

We are American citizens now, so that we can collect social security when it is time. Though we visit Calcutta every few years, and bring back more drawstring pajamas and Darjeeling tea, we have decided to grow old here. I work in a small college library. We have a son who attends Harvard University. Mala no longer drapes the end of her sari over her head, or weeps at night for her parents, but occasionally she weeps for our son. So we drive 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 (197)

Indira Nityanandam states -

Lahiri is a second generation expatriate and is probably aware that the process of acculturation is easier for them. However, Mala and her husband’s experiences are similar to what Lahiri’s parents must have experienced...gradually the ‘home’ shifted from ‘there’ to ‘here’ and the adopted land becomes the homeland....Yasmin Gooneratne in A Change of Skies asks, “How much time
does it take for an unfamiliar landscape to invade an individual’s mind, take possession of his imagination and change the colour not only of his words but of his soul?” (55)

His anxiety about his son’s growing proximity with American culture is typical of first generation. Similar to Ashoke Ganguli in The Namesake, he expresses his own fears, but he must accept the change, that according to him is only way of survival that will make his son stronger. He encourages his son to fulfill all his ambitions and says –

...if I can survive on three continents, then there is no obstacle he cannot conquer....I have remained in this new world for thirty years. I know that my achievement is quite ordinary. I am not the man to seek his fortune far from home, and certainly I am not the first. Still there are times I am bewildered by each mile I have travelled, each meal I have eaten, each person I have known, each room in which I have slept. As ordinary as it appears, there are times when it is beyond my imagination. (198)

Immigrants such as Mrs. Sen and Mr. Pirzada are victims of what J.W Berry terms as “acculturative stress” (9). This stress is an outcome of the immigrant’s anxieties and phobias about assimilating into the host society, which they think will invite hostile responses and racial ‘othering’. Their habits, modes of discourse and lifestyle etc are deeply affected by acculturation strategies they adopt. In Mr. Pirzada’s case this has been effective while Mrs. Sen fails miserably – “the individuals from the non – dominant group place a value on holding on to their original culture, and seek no contact with the dominant group then these individuals are pursuing a separation strategy” (Safran et.al
In psychology, the acculturation processes of immigrants are clearly marked by different strategies adopted by them such as – assimilation, separation, integration and marginalization. Second generation immigrant characters such as Lilia and the son of the narrator in “The Third and Final Continent” adopt the strategy of integration and marginalization that is they “lose cultural and psychological contact with both their traditional culture and larger society” (Berry 119).

The second generation immigrant tales in the collection, centered mainly on young couples are all about cultural crossover. They map the trajectories in the lives of Shoba and Shukumar, Twinkle and Sanjeev and Mr. and Mrs. Das as they slowly move towards the personal emancipation that immigration promises. To attain a total assimilation to the host environment they reject their ethnic and cultural markers that according to them threaten their attempts at adapting and adopting. Marital discord, loveless relationships and the pressure to live in a bi-cultural situation form the base for the stories such as “A Temporary Matter”, “Interpreter of Maladies”, “Sexy” and “This Blessed House”.

“A Temporary Matter” the opening story of the collection is about Shoba and Shukumar, an immigrant couple in Boston who are facing marital crisis. The crisis was initiated by the birth of their stillborn child. The power cut every evening that started off as a ‘temporary matter’ has become a saviour for their fading relationship. The estranged couple use the power cut time to spend some time together and reminiscence their past. Grown up in America, Shukumar does not have memories of India “His parents, who settled in New Hampshire, used to go back (to India) without him. The first time he’d gone as an infant he’d nearly died of amoebic dysentery” (12). On the contrary Shoba
who spent much time in India goes back to recreate it in her imagination, the power cut
she associates with India—"It's like India....Sometimes the current disappears for hours
at a stretch" (11).

Shoba had been a lively and inventive woman, before the death of the baby. She
would "throw together meals that appeared to have taken half a day to prepare, from
things she had frozen and bottled, not cheap things in tins but peppers she had marinated
herself with rosemary, and chutneys that she cooked on Sundays, stirring boiling pots of
tomatoes and prunes" (7). She loved cooking Indian food and their kitchen smelled of
"pound garlic cloves and cardamom pods" (9). For the two who "had become experts at
avoiding each other in their three-bedroom house, spending as much time on separate
floors as possible" the darkness made possible to sit together and confess to each other
things that they never said. Confessions ranged from Shoba drinking martini with Gillian
when Shukumar’s mother had come for a visit, her spying on his phone book to see if he
had written her name during the initial days of friendship etc. Shukumar confesses about
cheating in his oriental civilization exam, his tearing off a photo of a scantily clad woman
from a fashion magazine, his selling of a sweater that Shoba gifted, for a drink and so on.
The decisive confession that seals off the long lost love in the troubled relationship is that
Shukumar had seen their dead baby, a boy, whom he held in his hands briefly.

The story seems to be subtle reminder of the fact that, although the couple are tied
together in marital bond, the loneliness and aloofness, coupled with the death of their
baby seems too much to handle in a diasporic situation. Though they reconciled in the
end and "wept together, for things that they now know" (22), what makes their sorrow
more traumatic is the need for family and relatives. With the social fabric missing all
together, it is difficult for the younger generation to cope. Shoba’s situation is the one similar to the pregnant Ashima’s in *The Namesake*, the only difference being that Ashima is a first generation immigrant, where she says “It is the consequence; motherhood in a foreign land. For it was one thing to be pregnant, to suffer the queasy mornings in bed, the sleepless nights, the dull throbbing in her back, the countless visits to the bathroom...that it was happening so far from home, unmonitored and unobserved by those she loved, had made it more miraculous still” (6).

Unlike Shoba and Shukumar, who have been married for three years, Twinkle and Sanjeev in “The Blessed House” are newlyweds. Just two months into the marriage they are in the process of setting up a new home in Connecticut. As opposed to the inactive Shukumar, Sanjeev worked for a firm in Hartford, “At thirty three he had a secretary of his own and a dozen people working under his supervision…” (138). Twinkle, other than her name that sounded Indian did not have any traits of being a Bengali woman. Finishing her master thesis at Stanford, she takes interest in discovering Christian paraphernalia from their new house, which the previous tenants left, which Sanjeev disapproves – “We’re not Christians” (137). Twinkle’s growing obsession to find things from the house – porcelain effigy of Christ, biblical stickers, plaster Virgin Mary etc can be seen as her attempts to ward off the sense of boredom – “But I do nothing all day except sit at my desk” (141). Contrary to Sanjeev who went to work, met people at office had plenty of Indian acquaintances; she didn’t know anyone other than an ex-boyfriend of hers who worked in a pottery studio in Brookfield.

American in her attitude and lifestyle, Twinkle smokes cigarette and occasionally drinks alcohol. Uninterested in wifely duties she distances herself from household work.
A marriage of convenience, the relationship between Sanjeev and Twinkle is much hollow than it appears. A peculiar case of ‘familiarity breeds contempt’, he had come to detest his wife’s mannerisms and habits. As second generation immigrant, and far removed from Indian values and customs, they do not have any commitment –

She was twenty seven and recently abandoned, he had gathered, by an American who had tried and failed to be an actor; Sanjeev was lonely, with an excessively generous income for a single man, and had never been in love. At the urging of their matchmakers, they married in India, amid hundreds of well-wishers whom he barely remembered from his childhood... (143)

Bi-cultural situation is problematic when it comes to second generation Indian immigrant. Shoba and Twinkle struggle to shed their native traits and try hard to assimilate – “They refuse to be marginalized as the ‘other’ and ‘anonymous’ which are plainly speaking, ‘terms of depersonalization’ instead they hold that they constitute ‘another culture’ and ‘another history’ which commingles with those of the host country” (Das, 16). Twinkle, by way of smoking, drinking and adopting Christian belief, and Shoba by being independent, by spending more hours at office and even deciding to move into another apartment of her own without her husband. Pressure of maintaining two different cultures simultaneously adds to a situation of withdrawal where both the male characters try to limit themselves into their own ethnocentric situation. In the case of Shukumar, he stays home much of the time “...more he wanted to stay in, not even leaving to get mail, or to buy fruit or wine at the stores by the trolley stop” (2). Sanjeev constantly rejects his wife’s attempt to display Christian symbols in their house, and tries to deliberately become more culture-centric as possible.
"Interpreter of Maladies" the title story talks about an immigrant family and unfolds in the Indian state of Orissa. The family comprises of a young couple Mr. Das, his wife Mina and their three children who have come to India from Boston for a short vacation and are visiting Sun Temple at Konark. It reverses the immigrant situation and puts a second generation Indian immigrant family in India amidst Orissa in the mid July heat. The husband proudly remarks, "Oh, Mina and I were both born in America....Born and raised" (45).

It’s through the eyes of Mr. Kapasi a forty six year old taxi driver and tourist guide who takes them around that we see the world of the Das’s unfold. Living in New Jersey they are true Americans except for their tanned complexion – “The family looked Indian but dressed as foreigners did....Mrs. Das squeezed hands like an American...” (44). Like foreigners the family had their own presuppositions regarding India as a place very exotic, consisting of oriental charm, of dirt, heat and squalor. Mr. Das occasionally peeped the “paperback tour book, which said “INDIA” in yellow letters” (44) and even satisfied himself by taking pictures of a dirty barefoot man on a bullock cart. Their children are too excited to see a goat and the monkeys, which they are seeing for the first time out of the zoo. They view things with a gaze that of an American.

Mr. and Mrs. Das were so self centered, characteristic of their American upbringing that they often bickered about who will take care of the children. Mrs. Das did not show any kind of endearment towards the children or any physical affection typical of Indian parents. What she did most of the time was to eat her snack all alone and paint her nails. A keen observer of human nature, Mr. Kapasi feels – “They were all like siblings....Mr. and Mrs. Das behaved like an older brother and sister, not parents. It
seemed that they were in charge of the children only for the day; it was hard to believe they were regularly responsible for anything other than themselves” (49).

Mr. Kapasi is a way too educated for his job as a taxi driver. He informs the Das family that he worked as a teacher at an elementary school but left it for a job as an interpreter at a doctor’s clinic where he translates Gujarati for the patients. Mr. Kapasi knows many languages and thus acts as an interpreter for patients and goes well with foreign tourists. Mrs. Das who till now had remained aloof quickly takes an interest in Mr. Kapasi’s profession as an interpreter and finds it “romantic”. Unlike his own wife, who has least respect for his job, he finds Mrs. Das inspiring and loving. Mr. Kapasi interacts more with Mrs. Das while at the Sun temple and together they appreciate the erotic sculptures. Mrs. Das’s inquisitiveness towards him is again symbolic of the attraction of the west towards the east; their discourse is a case of the encounter of the east and west.

The real test for Mr. Kapasi, as an interpreter comes when Mrs. Das puts forth to him her own malady – “Eight years, Mr. Kapasi, I’ve been in pain eight years. I was hoping you could help me feel better, say the right thing. Suggest some kind of remedy.” (65) Mrs. Das confesses to him her secret that one of her sons Bobby, is not from her husband, but from his Punjabi friend. This leaves him astonished so much that he could not find a remedy but simply asked her “Is it really pain you feel, Mrs. Das, or is it Guilt?” (66).

Every immigrant has maladies of their own. Mrs. Das’s malady was that of her guilt of cheating on her husband. Her early marriage and subsequent pregnancies made
her aloof from the outer world – “Always tired, she declined invitations from her one or two college girlfriends, to have lunch or shop in Manhattan. Eventually the friends stopped calling her, so that she was left at home all day with the baby” (64). It was her attempt to break free, to find freedom outside the hold of matrimony, to find things that would be daring, that has led to her present situation. The truth that her malady has no cure makes her realize the worth of what she has now, her husband and her children to whom she slowly walks and joins. Asked about this story Lahiri says:

I think 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 other, as well as expressing it to ourselves. In some sense, I view myself as a writer, in so far as I attempt to articulate these emotions as a sort of interpreter as well (Reddy 142)

Miranda’s malady in the story “Sexy” is the adulterous relationship between her and the married man Dev, who is of Indian origin. In the absence of his wife, who Dev says resembles Madhuri Dixit; he spends time at Miranda’s apartment making love to her. Miranda an American woman, does not know much about India, in her ignorance she thinks that “Bengali” is a religion. Dev helps her to understand India in a better way by showing her the map in The Economist. With utmost curiosity she studies the map, tries to imagine the place Dev was born. Miranda’s only association to India is through the Dixits her neighbours when she was a child. She has always seen them as different, as weird and exotic, an amusement for the all white neighbourhood – “The fathers complained that Mr. Dixit did not fertilize his lawn properly, did not rake his leaves on time....The mothers never invited Mrs. Dixit to join them....the other children would say
“The Dixits dig shit” (95). Miranda feared the image of Durga that they had on their wall. From childhood she had grown up in a white community that marginalized Indian immigrants as bizarre and was taught not to intermingle with them. But her acquaintance with Lakshmi and Dev, both Indians, changes her thinking.

Parallel to this, Lahiri weaves another plot that involves Lakshmi, Miranda’s friend at the office and her cousin whose marriage is coming to an end. Lakshmi spends much of her time consoling her heartbroken cousin over the phone. She informs Miranda that her cousin’s husband fell for a white woman and now wants to divorce his wife and wants to stay with the white mistress. Realization dawns upon Miranda of her own brief affair with Dev, only with the coming of Rohin, the son of Lakshmi’s cousin whom she babysits for one day. Spending time at Miranda’s apartment, Rohin insists that she wears a silver cocktail dress she had once bought thinking she would wear it when she goes out with Dev. After Miranda appears in the dress Rohin says – “You’re sexy” (107). It reminded her of Dev who too had said the same thing to her when they visited the Mapparium. When on asking the little boy what it really meant, he says “It means loving someone you don’t know” (107). Miranda now knows fully that irrespective of the feelings that she has towards Dev, she will never equal his wife. What he has towards her is a mere physical attraction a brown man feels for a white woman. Dev an Indian is too bound by his tradition and custom that he will never leave his wife, like Rohin’s father had done and accept Miranda.

All the second generation tales in the collection echo the individual’s struggle in their own ways to find their identities in the shifting context. In this regard Nigamananda Das observes “...she (Lahiri) creates not mere ‘diasporic characters’ but ‘distinctly
individualized characters’ and writes not about ‘a specific cultural experience’ but about ‘human beings and the difficulties of existence’. Her focus is the ‘mindscape of characters’ and ‘human predicament’ in its wider perspective” (Das 15). All woman characters, Shoba, Twinkle, Mrs. Das and Miranda stand at different point of their life where they must comprehend their own way towards destiny. With the growing dissatisfaction in marital relationships and the tradition and customs losing its charm they must strive to attain selfhood as immigrants, out of their associations as wives, mothers or lovers.

Interpreting the ‘maladies’ that hover the immigrant psyche submerged into the worlds split by affiliations – the east and the west, Lahiri seems to throw open the question of existence. Expressing metaphorically the liminal space her characters exist in, she emphasizes the need of a shifting frame of reference which can exemplify well the world of plurality and multiplicity, which according to her is the definite home of the diasporans now. This space, she portrays as one in which they live along with many others who share predicaments similar to them.

In Unaccustomed Earth, Lahiri focuses on the experience of second generation immigrants and their children. Thematically interrelated, the stories trace the lives of Bengalis who have, now for a long time lived in the United States. The thrust being the assimilation of younger generations into western culture which provide global perspectives, Lahiri weaves eight interconnected stories that take place across the globe – Cambridge, Seattle, Italy, London, Calcutta and Thailand. Intermingling immigrant experience with individual lives, Lahiri renders the most complicated issues of the
sensitivity and intellect. Lily Tuck in her article “Exiles on Main Street” is of the opinion that –

The eight stories in this collection revolve less around the dislocation Lahiri’s earlier Bengali characters encountered in America and more around the assimilation experienced by their children -- children who, while conscious of and self-conscious about their parents' old-world habits, vigorously reject them in favour of American lifestyles and partners. (n.pag.)

The melting pot giving way to a more tolerant multicultural mosaic is what the stories here hint at. Boris Kachka says “Unaccustomed Earth—eight mature stories each stretching almost to novella length. Her heroes are Chekhov, Hardy, William Trevor, and Alice Munro. Surrounded by acolytes of Rushdie or De Lillo, she’s a traditionalist” (n. pag.)

The focus here is to look at the stories and examine how Lahiri portrays diaspora in a positive light especially the notion of ‘hybridity’ and ‘multiculturalism’. The study further engages in looking at how Lahiri emphasizes on creating a third space, where the binaries building cultural identities rupture down, constructing a hybrid identity. In The Location of Culture Homi Bhabha says, “In this displacement, the borders between home and world become confused, and uncanny, the private and the public become part of each other, forcing upon us a vision that is as divided as it is disorienting” (75).

The collection opens up with an epigraph, from “The Custom House” by American author Nathaniel Hawthorne, which calls attention to the fact that transplanting people into new environment and unaccustomed soil makes them strong and more flourishing. The epigraph reads thus:
Human nature will not flourish, more than a potato, if it be planted and replanted, for too long a series of generation, in the same worn-out soil. My children have had other birthplaces, and, so far as their fortunes may be within my control, shall strike their roots into Unaccustomed Earth. (i)

Hugh Tinker, in his book *The Banyan Tree: Overseas Emigrants from India, Pakistan and Bangladesh*, refers to a paragraph by Rabindranath Tagore, wherein Tagore compares the process of immigration and exile to that of a banyan tree spreading its roots thus -

To study a banyan tree, you not only must know its main stem, in its own soil, but must trace the growth of its greatness in the further soil, for then you can know the true vitality. The civilization of India, like the banyan tree, has shed its beneficent shade away from its own birthplace...India can live and grow by spreading abroad not the political, but the ideal India. (qtd. in Jayaram 15)

This is an applicable symbol for the conversion undergone by Lahiri’s women characters to America, especially the second generation. America, in the fiction of writers like Lahiri, assumes the status of a cultural mosaic, a place where people from around the world comes to inhabit and reinvent themselves, leaving behind the weight of heritage and calm of distant homelands. Abhijit Nag observes “Jhumpa Lahiri writes about Indian Americans. But this is really literature of globalization and the immigrant experience — at the opposite end of Monica Ali’s *Brick Lane* and Kiran Desai’s *The Inheritance of Loss*. Lahiri writes about highly qualified, professionally successful immigrants” (n.pag.)

Lahiri in these stories turns to a much more personal space and makes observations about human relationships wherein she explores the tangled relationships
between characters and how they struggle and survive in the context of settling into unfamiliar space. The stories are about different facets of human life and relationship in different situations. The parent-child relationship becomes the milieu of stories such as “Unaccustomed Earth”, “Hell-Heaven”, “A Choice of Accommodation” and “Year’s End”. In an interview with Robert. J. Hughes, of the New York Times, Lahiri says

“In the new book, yes, all of the characters are immigrants or children of immigrants, but that’s not all, what’s happening. The things the characters are going through are, for the lack of a better word, pretty universal experiences: parent-child relationships, brother-sister relationship, and husband-wife relationship whatever it is” (n.pag.)

The story “Unaccustomed Earth” is an illustration of the lives of Ruma, a self-centered pregnant daughter and her likewise self-centered father. Ruma is a woman in her early thirties who has moved to Seattle from Brooklyn. With her three year old son Akash and another baby on the way she is torn between her life and her father’s. Ruma worries that her father, now a widower, will become a liability, an added require, continuously present in her world. It would mean an end to the family she had created on her own. Ruma is married to Adam, an American with English background, who is a typical workaholic.

What makes the story compelling is the limited communication between the father and daughter – “The postcards were the first pieces of mail Ruma had received from her father. In her thirty eight years he’d never had any reason to write to her” (8). Both afraid in some way to acknowledge that they have moved away from their culture of origin and have embraced aspects of the new culture, father and daughter, together and
apart, are embarking uneasily on new stages of life. The father seems to be concerned about his daughter and is haunted by echoes of his wife’s predicaments decades before - “like his wife, Ruma now was alone in this new place, overwhelmed, without friends, caring for a young child, all of it reminded him, of the early years of his marriage, years for which his wife had never forgiven him. He had always assumed Ruma’s life would be different” (24). The ambivalent relationship, towards the end turns into a sort of affection, which Ruma forms towards her father. Ruma wants him to stay back. Contrary to her expectation, the father declines “He did not want to be part of another family, part of the mess, the feuds, the demands, the energy of it” (31).

The next to follow the destiny of the second generation immigrant is Akash, Ruma’s son who belongs to the third generation. During the father’s stay at Ruma’s house, his relationship with his grandson grows stronger. Akash develops a strong interest with his grandfather’s habit that is foreign to him, including the Bengali language. He tries to imitate his grandfather’s ways, while trying to eat with his hands, or removing his shoes, before entering the room. In a way the old father seems to fulfill the duties of a father, which he had missed out while his own children grew up. But he does it all over again for his grandson, thereby striking a permanent bond with the far moving third generation.

The father looks after Ruma’s abandoned garden during his stay at her place. His grandson accompanies him. The father’s act of ploughing, digging, preparing the soil, all metaphorically symbolizes his yearning to go back to his roots or they can symbolize his attempts to spread his roots into a new soil. While on the other hand his grandson, digs holes to plant Legos, a plastic dinosaur and a wooden block with a star. These toys are all
representative of the third generation and of modern American lifestyle. The child’s act of planting his toy is symbolic of a merger of different cultures that’s inevitable in any given situation.

"Only Goodness" is another story where second generation immigrant experience find momentum. A second generation immigrant Sudha is guilt laden for introducing her brother Rahul to alcohol. Contrary to others, their parents had taken pains to bring them up in American ways. After Rahul graduates, the parents throw a party and boast about how they "successfully raised two children in America" (129). Unknown of the approaching misery, they send him to Cornell for further studies where he fails miserably and becomes an addict to alcohol, an inevitable way of the American teenage life. Sudha tries her best to bring him out of this, but fails miserably. Ignoring their son’s problems the parents put up the pretense of being proud parents of successful kids for very long –

Her parents had always been blind to the things that plagued their children: being teased at school for the colour of their skin or for the funny things their mother occasionally put into their lunch boxes, potato curry sandwiches that tinted wonder bread green. What could these possibly be to be unhappy about? Her parents would have thought. "Depression" was a foreign word to them, an American thing. In their opinion their children were immune from the hardships and injustices they had left behind in India. (143 - 44)

Plagued by the distress that she feels in America, Sudha leaves for London, a place where she was born and hence she associates more as home – "She was excited to be in London, curious to know the land of her birth. Before she had applied for her British passport, a document her parents had not obtained for her when she was born, and when she
presented it a Heathrow the immigration officer welcomed her home” (144). Marrying Roger, an Englishman, Sudha shuns the old world custom of arranged marriage. For the second generation such as Sudha, the definition of home is ever elusive. Cultural heritage or ethnicities are not binding factors for them as they keep drifting away with the demands of society to fit in. Aware of their own advantages Sudha and Rahul enjoy the freedom of the new found world; accent free English and the ability to transgress boundaries of customs and religion.

“Nobody’s Business” has Sangeeta Biswas, a young Bengali woman madly in love with Farouk, who likes to be addressed ‘Freddy’. Narrated through the point of view of her American housemate Paul, who harbours a secret crush on her, the story talks about the tragic breakup of Sang and Freddy. Sang, as she is affectionately known amidst her American friends, with all her modern outlooks, her rebellion, deliberately distances herself from conventional parents. But like all others she too falls into the same nasty cycle of typical Indian housewife – in order to keep the relationship alive, she cooks for Farouk, cleans and irons for him, but her efforts fail as he betrays her and eventually she walks out of the relationship and also out of the country.

Two women are at the heart of the story “Hell- Heaven”. The mother daughter relationship and the strong filial bonding is the theme of the story. Narrated in first person by Usha, the daughter and definitely a second generation immigrant, who by now has become an adult, it talks about her mother’s initial experience as a first generation Indian woman immigrant in America. What she remembers vividly is the presence of Pranab Chakraborty, who changed both her and her mother’s life to an extent. Married to a serious and sober, typical introvert, scholar scientist, the narrator’s mother, a typical
Bengali wife falls in love with Pranab Chakraborty, a young Bengali student, only to see him wed Deborah an American woman. The daughter remembers –

Before we met him, I would return from school and find my mother with her purse in her lap and her trench coat on, desperate to escape the apartment where she had spent the day alone. But now I would find her in the kitchen, rolling out dough for Luchis, which she normally made only on Sundays for my father and me, or putting up new curtains, she'd bought at Woolworth's. I did not know, back then, that Pranab Kaku's visits were what my mother looked forward all day, that she changed into a new sari and combed her hair in anticipation of his arrival, and that she planned, days in advance, the snacks she would serve him with such nonchalance. (63)

Years back, Usha vowed to be everything her mother was not. Instead of her mother, she formed a liking towards Deborah, the American woman, and imitated her ways. Usha shunned her mother's traditional ways and secretly yearned for a sophisticated life of an American, as exemplified by Deborah. But towards the end, the mother is miraculously transformed into a broad minded, educated, mature woman, well understanding her daughter's way of life – "My mother and I had made peace; she had accepted the fact that I was not only her daughter but a child of America as well. Slowly, she accepted that I dated one American man, and then another, and then yet another, that I slept with them, and even that I lived with one though we are not married" (81-82).

The mother's revelation of her one sided secret love for a Pranab, to her daughter, when she herself is recovering from her broken heart, forms an intense bond between the mother and daughter, a bond of connection, understanding and sharing. The young
protagonist Usha towards the end of the story says, "My mother told Deborah none of this. It was to me that she confessed; after my own heart was broken by a man I’d hoped to marry" (83).

In the three interconnected stories in the second part, together titled "Hema and Kaushik", the first is told from the point of view of the young female protagonist Hema; the second from the point of view of the male protagonist Kaushik; and the last, in third person conveys a nostalgic and ultimately tragic experience. The stories look at the relationship between childhood friends, who later become strangers and eventually lovers, until death drew them apart.

The stories dived into three definite phases trace the lives of Hema and Kaushik from childhood to adulthood. Beginning in the year 1974, amidst a tightly knit Bengali circle in Cambridge, Hema then a six year old recalls her childhood liking for Kaushik, the son of her parent’s Bengali friends. Hema’s narrative, at once personal, gives a foretaste of the first generation Bengali immigrants in Cambridge, Harvard and MIT. What finds place in her narration is the lavish get together her parents host, where large number of Bengalis crammed into their small apartment that smelled of “lamb curry and pullao” (223). Kaushik’s family move to Mumbai just to return after seven years. Now returned once again to America, they take pride in the fact that, living in India, they took great pain to look American in all aspects, whether it is their way of living, eating or even their mode of discourse. They boast about their son’s upbringing, “Even in Bombay we managed to raise a typical American Teenager” (238). Liesl Schillinger in her review of the book in The New York Times says –
Except for their names, “Hema and Kaushik” could evoke any American’s 70’s childhood, any American’s bittersweet acceptance of the compromises of adulthood. The generational conflicts Lahiri depict cut across national lines; the waves of admiration, competition and criticism that flow between the two families, could occur between Smiths and Taylors in any suburban town…”

“Year’s End” rather grim and tragic in nature, probes deep into the profound experience of death and loss of Kaushik’s mother. At one point, Kaushik flees his family, working his solitary way up to coast of Maine in the middle of winter - “I had never travelled alone before and I discovered that I liked it. No one in the world knew where I was....It was like being dead, my escape allowing me to taste that tremendous power my mother possessed forever” (290). Kaushik returning home after his mother’s death cannot reconcile himself, neither to his father’s remarriage nor to the truth of living with two step sisters.

The third and last story in the section “Going Ashore” documents the vagabond life of both Hema and Kaushik. Drifting apart from the family after his mother’s death and his father’s subsequent marriage, Kaushik has become a photo journalist. Wandering through Mexico, Guatemala and El Salvador, he witness political turmoil, civil wars and disasters. A perpetual wanderer he ends up in Italy, a detour he takes before finally taking up a job in Hong Kong.

Hema, now a professor of Latin, who has a PhD by now, takes off to Italy as well on pretext of visiting libraries. Having called off her long term affair with Julian, a married man, she is now engaged to marry Navin. Hema likes Navin’s traditionalism and
respect, “It touched her to be treated, at 37, like a teenage girl” (317). Aware of the fact that her solitary existence at the age of thirty seven was coming to an end, she uses this time to unwind herself, savouring her isolation. Her accidental meeting with Kaushik rekindles her childhood attraction and they begin a momentary affair mostly centered on physical affection before parting ways. Hema has been a nomad; she says “I’ve never belonged to any place that way” (320). Having travelled so much both Hema and Kaushik learn to make their home anywhere they are, just as his mother – “His mother had set up households again and again in her life. It didn’t matter where she was in the world, or whether or not she was dying; she had always given everything to make her homes beautiful, always drawn from her things, her walls” (309). It evidently shows that the place to which you feel the strongest attachment need not necessarily be the country you are tied to by blood or birth. It is the place that allows you to become yourself, the ‘Unaccustomed Earth’ where one strikes new roots in order to thrive and flourish. Just as the metaphor of striking roots in unknown soil and extracting sustenance from it, Hema and Kaushik learn from their experiences at unfamiliar places and strive to live. They both fall back to each other to investigate a sense of homelessness, or rather of being home at all places. Addressing their stories directly to each other, they reminiscent their shared childhood. Finally Hema and Kaushik discover a tie which seems to be sacred given their common past, but that does not keep them from being together, but as the situation demands they both move towards their own distinct futures.

In the global world that we live today, cross cultural influences have led to what we term as “Hybridity”. As a result of colonialism and its aftermath, mixing of cultures (east/west, colonizer/colonized, suppressed dominant) had led to many forms of
hybridity. In recent postcolonial discourse, hybridity has become an enticing idea to be discussed. Hybridity refers in its most elemental sense to ‘a mixture’. It denotes something, whose origin lies in heterogeneous elements and is composed of certain mixing. In postcolonial era, hybrid with its neither/nor nature demonstrates non-fixity, pluralism and ambivalence. In postcolonialism, identity is never fixed or static; it keeps evolving every time it comes into contact with different things. Its ambivalence and state of flux, that has forced cultural theorist to debate upon hybrids and hybridity as a positive site of contestation representative of post colonial and post structural angst. The Oxford English Dictionary defines hybrid in the following manner:

f.L. *hybrida*, more correctly *hibrida* (*ibrida*), offspring of a tame sow and wild boar; hence, of human parents of different races, half-breed. [...] A few examples of this word occur early in 17th c; but it was scarcely in use till the 19th. The only member of the group given by Johnson is HYBRIDOUS a [...] (qtd. in Fludernik 9)

It was Mikhail Bhaktin who came up with his formulations of linguistic hybridity through his discussions on the dialogic imagination in the 1980’s. Bhaktin’s statement was that, languages in the contemporary world came into existence through certain kind of mixing. Homi. K. Bhabha describes the hybrid space as a ‘stairwell’. Joel Kuortti and Jopi Nyman in *Reconstructing Hybridity: Postcolonial Studies in Transition* (2007), suggest Bhabha’s notion as a state of transformation –

The Stairwell as liminal space, in-between the designations of identity, becomes the process of symbolic interaction. the connective tissue that constructs the
difference between upper and lower, black and white. The hither and tither of the stairwell, the temporal movement and passage that it allows, presents identities at either end of it from setting into primordial polarities. This interstitial passage between fixed identifications opens up the possibility of a cultural hybridity that entertains difference without an assumed or imposed hierarchy (Kuortti and Nyman 5).

Homi K. Bhabha took this further and applied the notion of hybridity to colonialism. Bhabha—

sought to show how the single – voiced authority of colonial discourse is ‘undone’ through the intentional hybridization of language. As the colonial language becomes infused with the ‘trace’ of the language of the colonized, its doubleness infects its own systems of representation and control, effectively undermining the entire colonial edifice of power/knowledge. (qtd. in Atkinson 190)

Authors and theorists have given different meanings to the word. In postcolonial fiction we often see characters that are essentially hybrid. Some examples of such characters can be seen novels like Salman Rushdie’s The Satanic Verses, Hanif Kureishi’s My Beautiful Launderette and Zadie Smith’s White Teeth. Hybridity has now become an essential component of diasporic identity; the term in today’s time has come to mean many things and has opened itself to different readings.

Gilroy, for example, finds it helpful in the field of cultural production, where he notes that ‘the musical components of hip hop are a hybrid form nurtured by the
social relations of the South Bronx where Jamaican sound system culture was transplanted during the 1970's'. Hall, as we...suggests hybridity in transforming British life...Bhabha uses hybridity as an in-between term, referring to a ‘third space’, and to ambivalence and mimicry especially in the context of what might, uneasily, be called the colonial-cultural interface. Clifford uses the word to describe ‘a discourse that is travelling or hybridizing in new global conditions’ and he stresses ‘travel trajectories’ and flow. (Kalra 71)

Hybridity is very much prevalent in culture, which incorporates within it, art, music, fashion, cuisines, and so on. Cultural hybridity is also extremely widespread today, as one sees a proliferation of fusion cuisine, and fusion musical forms, fusion dressing and so on. Most of the second generation characters in Lahiri’s stories are cultural hybrids.

Ruma is well brought up in the American way with rare visits to India. She saw that as a time to travel and explore. She thought of boarding a plane to India to simply see the canals of Venice or the Eiffel Tower of the windmills and tulips of Holland from the window of the aircraft. Ruma grew up under the demand of severe pressure to be two things, loyal to the old world and confident in the new. She mostly felt she failed at both - “She’d always felt unfairly caste, by both her parents, into roles that weren’t accurate: as her father’s oldest son, her mother’s secondary spouse” (36).

Ruma’s father a first generation immigrant, having lived in America for a long time assimilates himself well into the world into which his children have already settled in. On seeing her father after a long time Ruma contemplates- -“he (father) was wearing a baseball cap that said POMPEII, brown cotton pants and a sky-blue Polo shirt, and a
pair of white leather sneakers. She was struck by the degree, to which her father resembled an American in his old age with his gray hair and fair skin he could have been practically from anywhere” (11). Essentially a cultural hybrid the father has now acquired the status of being a nowhere man, acclimatizing himself to any given situation, he is at peace with his life.

In almost all the stories that deal with the theme of marriage and love, Lahiri deliberately makes a union of one American and the other non-American. Both Ruma in the story “Unaccustomed Earth” and Sudha in “Only Goodness”, get married to men with American and English background respectively. Ruma’s husband Adam who is constantly referred to by Ruma and her father is a typical workaholic. Though an American, Adam is well accepted in Ruma’s family and to an extent replaces, Ruma’s brother Romi, who has long left the family. Sudha, marries, a much older man Roger Featherstone, of English descent, with the consent of her family. Lahiri writes:-

They accepted that she and Roger planned to have a registry wedding in London, that they were willing to have only a reception in Massachusetts, that Roger had been previously married, that he and Sudha had a fourteen-year gap. They approved of his academic qualifications, ... It helped that he ‘had been born in India, that he was English and not American, drinking tea, not coffee, and saying “zed” not “zee”, superficial things that allowed her parents to relate to him. (154)

In “A Choice of Accommodation Amit Sarkar, a Bengali is married to a much older surgeon, Megan who is an American. Attending an old school friend Pam’s wedding at Langford, the couple takes time together to think over their own relationship, their disagreement, the fading love and most of all the sexual tension. Amit has harbored
a secret, the crush he used to have on Pam, as a young boy, but when finally he tells Megan about it, "... the information fell between them, negligible now that he had told" (104). At the wedding, Amit ends up talking to a complete stranger about his marriage, "... he considered for a moment, actually, it was after the second that our marriage sort of - he paused, searching for the right word - "disappeared" (112). The tension between them is the result of the cultural hybridity that Amit has been forced to adopt in order to fit in his wife's family. His daughters too have been American showing no trace of Indianess, an overpowering influence of his American wife.

Linguistic hybridity can refer to elements from foreign languages that enter into a given language, whether it's the adoption of English words into Asian or African languages, or the advent of Asian or African words into English. Linguistic hybridity can be seen through the infiltration of slang, patois, pidgin, and other native dialect. Linguistic hybridity is an essential constituent in the life of second and third generation immigrants. A primary pointer of identity, language has been vital in defining diaspora. The second generation immigrants, no longer have the ability to speak and express in their native tongue, even their mother tongue gets mangled.

For Ruma in "Unaccustomed Earth"

Bengali had never been a language in which she felt like an adult. Her own Bengali was slipping from her. Her mother had been strict, so much so that Ruma had never spoken to her in English. But her father didn't mind. On the rare occasions Ruma used Bengali anymore, when an aunt or uncle called from Calcutta to wish her a Happy Bijoya or Akash a Happy Birthday, she stripped
over words, mangled tenses. And yet it was the language she had spoken exclusively in the first years of her life. (12)

Second generation children like Ruma serve as “cultural translators” for their first generation parents. As a young child, Usha in “Hell Heaven” feels at ease with English, she says “Deborah and I spoke freely in English, a language in which, by that age, I expressed myself more easily than Bengali, which I was required to speak at home” (69). Kaushik in “Year’s End, foresees the language change which his step sister’s would eventually undergo as a result of their long stay in America. He says, “They spoke to me in English, their accents and their intonations sounding as severe as mine must have sounded...I knew the accents would diminish and then disappear, as would their unstylish sweaters, their silly hairstyles” (263).

Racial hybridity is defined as, reflecting the merger of two genetic streams. Ruma’s young son Akash, is the one belonging to the third generation. A racial hybrid, Akash is a merger of two genetic streams, American and Indian. He takes after Ruma’s Indianess as well as the paleness of his American father:

He was a perfect synthesis of Ruma and Adam, his curly hair they’d never cut and his skin a warm gold, the faint hair they’d never cut and his skin a warm gold” (10). Lahiri observes, “In spite of her (Ruma’s) efforts he was turning into the sort of American child she was always careful not to be, the sort that horrified and intimidated her mother: imperious, afraid of eating things. (23)

This is the reality concerning the second and third generation immigrants, the more the children grew, and the less they had seemed to resemble their parents. They spoke differently, and seemed foreign in every way. The old father laments the change
undergone by both his daughter and his grandson, thereby tearing apart the last link that tied him to his native land and custom. Lahiri observes -

The more the children grew, the less they had seemed to resemble either parent - they spoke differently, dressed differently, seemed foreign in every way, from the texture of their hair to the shapes of their feet and hands. Oddly, it was his grandson, who was only half-Bengali to begin with, who did not even have a Bengali surname, with whom he felt a direct biological connection, a sense of himself reconstituted in another. (56)

In “A Choice of Accommodation”, Amit is worried about the racial hybridity his daughters have acquired –

“His daughters looked nothing like him, nothing like his family, and in spite of the distance Amit felt from his parents, this fact bothered him; that his mother and father had passed down nothing, physically, to his children. Both Maya and Monika had inherited Megan’s colouring, without a trace of Amit’s deeply tan skin and black eyes, so that apart from their vaguely Indian names they appeared fully American” (94)

Memory is a generous tool in diasporic writing, through which connections are made between the individual and his past heritage and history. The principle concerns of the stories are with memory and nostalgia, as Lahiri and her women characters go through pain and loss. As the stories weave in and out of time, memories play an important role in character development. Memory plays its part into bringing alive the childhood of Hema in “Once in a lifetime”. The story begins with a poignant recollection of events from the past, “I had seen you before, too many times to count, but a farewell
that my family threw for years, at our house in Inman Square, is when I begin to recall your presence in my life” (223). The story is set in Cambridge, as Kaushik along with his parents, having returned from India and while searching for a new house move in with Hema and her parents for the sometime. In “Hema and Kaushik” stories memory forms the background with which both the protagonists can be amply crafted and understood.

The past becomes an unvarying existence for Ruma in “Unaccustomed Earth” who associates it with the memory of the death of her mother. She and her father constantly bring the dead mother back to life, by their constant reference to the mother, her ways of association and her special ways of speaking and behaving. On the contrary, for Sudha in “Only Goodness”, the memories of the past are always haunting. Sudha along with her parents tries to cover up the past which for her and her family has always been tarnished by the unpleasant memories of her brother Rahul’s failures in his academic life and his eventual addiction to alcohol. Hiding the murky past, from her American husband Roger, Sudha hopes for her brother’s salvation, but is disappointed and shattered at the end. Hence for the characters, memory is both pleasant and unpleasant. A constant force through which they come to know who they are or what they have become.

At the core of the concept of diaspora lies the image of a journey, of movement, of incessant travels. Specific to the stories here, diasporic journeys are all about striking roots in unfamiliar soil, of settling down elsewhere, of creating home on the move. Stories in Unaccustomed Earth reveal the human yearning for movement and change, as well as the need for an acknowledgement of the past. Edward Said says. “Homes are always provisional; borders crossed and identities are formed. on the move” (Bromley
Quite contrary to her earlier works, Lahiri's characters in this collection, undertake journeys across the world, mostly moving through the vast expanse of Europe. As the panorama of an epic spans nations and boundaries, the stories here take us through America, Europe and expand to the Eastern countries, such as Thailand. In all the stories, we have description of incessant travel. The women here are all 'transnational' beings – "the process by which immigrants forge and sustain multi-stranded social relations that link together their societies of origin and settlement" (Shukla 12).

Generally 'transnationalism' implies movement of diasporic subjects across one or more nations. With the 1990's such movements became so rapid that it gave rise to terms such as "transnational networks" and "transnational communities". Safran, Sahoo and Lal in Transnational Migrations: The Indian Diaspora (2009) defines 'transnationalism' thus – "Today, diasporic communities go beyond the host nation – state and motherland to network with their communities dispersed around the globe. The emergence of such networking, cutting across several countries, is most appropriately described by the term "Transnationalism" (xi).

In the title story Ruma is twice exiled, having moved from New York to Seattle, she finally settles down to build up her family. Her father undertakes many journeys -

In the past year he had visited France, Holland, and most recently Italy. They were package tours, travelling in the company of strangers, riding by bus through the countryside, each meal and museum and hotel prearranged. He was gone for two, three sometimes four weeks at a time. When he was away Ruma did not hear from him. Each time, she kept the printout of his flight information behind a magnet on the door of the refrigerator, and on the days he was scheduled to fly
she watched the news, to make sure there hadn’t been a plane crash anywhere in
the world. (3)

Each textual journey of the characters over ethnic, linguistic, cultural, national, political
and economic boundaries has to be expressed with inner, mental journey undertaken by
the characters. Multiple displacements form the core in stories such as “Hell-Heaven”
and “Only Goodness”. The narrator Usha in “Hell Heaven” says

My parents and I had lived in Central Square for three years prior to that day;
before that, we lived in Berlin, where I was born and where my father had
finished his training in microbiology before accepting a position as a researcher at
Mass General, and before Berlin my mother and father had lived in India. (61)

Sudha and Rahul in “Only Goodness” move from Connecticut and go to Philadelphia and
Cornell respectively. Within the years of growing up they travel to Spain, Wayland,
London etc. Sudha was born in London, raised in Massachusetts and Philadelphia and
finally settles down with her husband Roger in London. In the story “Year’s End”,
Kaushik’s journey to India is only a prelude to his return to America. As a middle aged
man, he becomes a wanderer. He finds solace in his escapades to distant places such as
Rome and Thailand. Hema too embarks on a journey from Massachusetts, to Italy and
finally to India, trying to find her identity.

Lahiri’s characters not only pursue actual journeys by also journeys of the mind,
trying in all possible ways to accommodate and assimilate. In Lahiri’s stories, characters
gain knowledge about the worthlessness of restricting themselves with the restraints of
culture and tradition. They are wanderers, navigating imperceptible borders, when the
strong configuration of family, culture and tradition crumble under the weight of
immigration. Her characters, Ruma, Usha, Sudha and Hema find other places to be home and are capable of establishing kinship with strangers. Moving from one place to another, they evolve and mature gaining experience and developing a global consciousness. This reflects the prospects for new life that these replanting promises. The woman characters emerge out to be cosmopolitan and hybrid accepting their dual identities. This reflects Lahiri’s own position as a writer and her diasporic position which she has come to terms with. As Lakshmi Kannan comments, “For a woman, her works are no less a process of self-actualization as her life is. In both, she wrestles with a host of obstinate paradigms and syndromes” (Dodiya 169). Makarand Paranjape’s argument fits best in this context. He says that the diaspora “…must involve a cross cultural or cross civilization passage” (9). This can be seen as the best way for the immigrants to get away with the feeling of guilt and nostalgia – a way of being not ‘too Indian’ and not ‘too American’. Schillinger observes –

As her (Lahiri’s) characters mature in their new environments, they carry with them the potential for upheaval. Geography is no guarantee of security. The stories show that people may be felled at any time by swift jabs of chance, wherever they happen to live. Uncontrollable events may assail them - accidents of fate, health etc. More often, they suffer dramatic reversals: failed love affairs, growing differences between children and parents, and their effort to turn Americans of sorts - the sort of troubles that seem unavoidable. (n.pag.) Lahiri’s women – Ruma, Sudha, Usha, Sang and Hema are all in the process of accelerating their process of Americanization. The methods taken up by them includes “…speaking fluent and un-accented English, befriending and marrying whites,
identifying oneself as American, embracing consumerism and capitalism, not questioning laws, adhering to key institutional expectations (education system, heterosexual marriage, the primary labour market etc)” (Safran et.al 47). The more her characters show signs of these traits, the more assimilated they become.

Dhingra and Cheung in the book *Naming Jhumpa Lahiri: Canons and Controversies* says *Unaccustomed Earth* does articulate with poise, delicacy and sensibility, the multiple and different problems of rerooting/rerouting from one place to another, from one culture to another. And creating such narratives that speak both for and to immigrants new and old, in fostering empathy in its readers for (some kind of) difference under the guise of sameness, Lahiri’s writing builds a (trans) national community. (206)

Since Lahiri began the book with a quote from Hawthorne emphasizing the need to creating homes elsewhere, it seems apt to again quote a few lines from Nathaniel Hawthorne’s which exemplifies that those who have left their homeland, now assume the status of citizen of the world, for whom whole world is home. According to Hawthorne “Soon, likewise, my old native town will loom, upon me through the haze of memory, a mist brooding over and around it; as if it were no portion of real earth, but overgrown village in cloud land...henceforth, its ceases to be the reality of my life. I am a citizen of somewhere else” (38).
CONCLUSION

The man who finds his homeland sweet is still a tender beginner; he to whom every soil is as his native one is already strong; but he is perfect to whom the entire world is a foreign land

(Said, The World, The Text and The Critic 7)

Diaspora writing assumes greater significance in the context of globalization. The times have changed and we are now witnessing “retreating empires” and advancing diasporas” (Paranjape 1). Culture and language are altered as they come into contact with other languages and cultures. Immigration and exile has created new scope for perceiving nation and narration. Writings from the different diaspora locations have shown way for a literature that is heterogeneous and plural at the same time. Having discussed the trajectory of diasporic movements across time (from roughly the early part of twentieth century to the year 2006), as decipherable from the stories, and across generation (first, second and invariably the upcoming third) the question arises of where does diaspora stand. What is the future of it? William Safran seems to have summed it well when he suggests that –

Diaspora discourse is here to stay, thanks to the recent advances in the fields of transportation and communication technology that has brought diaspora communities globally dispersed closer to each other besides to their places of origin, the ancestral land or motherland. The advent of the internet has contributed immensely to the growth of transnational networks, diasporic imaginary and
virtual communities. There is revival of the "local" in the global context, with the shrinking of space and time (Safran et al. x)

With the tide of globalization having swept us off our feet, it is difficult for our generation to get hold of the sense of time and place. With the advancement of science and technology, the world seems to be shrinking, the distances diminishing. Barry Lopez commenting upon a literature of place writes —"I want to talk about geography as a shaping force, not as a subject....A specific and particular setting for human experience and endeavour is, indeed central to the work of many nature writers. I would say a sense of place is also critical to the development of a sense of morality and of human identity (Lopez 7).

The axiom of this new globalized era are - heterogeneity, hybridity, multiculturalism etc. "We are living at a time when the idea of "Indianess" is being interrogated from different perspectives- those of dalits, tribals, women, gays, lesbians and other cultural minorities" (Paranjape 19) Thus the inherent notions of the imperialist and colonialist India is being rewritten in view of the globalized India, where cultures are getting mixed, languages intermingled and boundaries being crossed. In the same way the recent imperative discourses on diaspora are also being altered in view of the diasporic writer's perception of their country, and they are occupied in projecting different imagined communities, alternative nationhood. Diaspora has now come to mean many things, from Rushdie's concept of 'imaginary homeland' to Homi Bhabha's 'gathering' experience. Benedict Anderson's 'imagined community', Stuart Hall's 'heterogeneity and diversity', and Avtar Brah's 'plural space'. Renowned theorists have defined diaspora in their own terminologies. Edward Said in his essay "Reflections on Exile" asks "But if
true exile is a condition of terminal loss, why has it been transformed so easily into a potent, even enriching, motif of modern culture?” (175).

After having said and discussed a great deal about Indian diaspora and its course, how it has matured from being an indenture and labour diaspora to one that of a major economic force, it is necessary now to leave behind the days of ‘impossible mourning’ as Vijay Mishra points out. Makarand Paranjape believes that “being a diasporan” need not always connote “an anguished state” (vi) –

It may actually be a form of biculturalism, a richer and a more complex way of being that is equally at home and abroad, in des and pardes, sometimes reversing or inverting the one for the other. Moreover, this diaspora may have a very significant role to play in shaping of the future of homeland itself....Certainly, one sees an astonishing cultural continuity when one crosses boundaries these days – one never has to leave India, so to speak, even as one leaves its shores. (vi)

Our ever growing Indian diaspora, hence is symbolic of the identity that of a ‘global Indian’. The trend today is to set up multiple homes, while on the move, in transit, in the peripheries as well as the centers. With the advancement of technology diasporans feel at home whether in New York, London, New Delhi or Sydney. The west has opened up to accommodate heterogeneous communities and as part it we find Indian and Chinese cuisine, Indian music, African dance and art forms etc penetrating western culture. And in return the east has become the largest consumers of the west global market. We have the privilege of sitting in our own cities of Delhi and Mumbai and enjoying the Starbucks coffee, burgers from McDonalds and KFC and very soon from the hyper market giants like Wall Mart and Macy’s.
The writings by Shauna Singh Baldwin, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni and Jhumpa Lahiri are subtle reminders at the newest tendencies of letting go the victim tag from the diaspora consciousness and emphasizing the new promises such transplantations hold within. Instances of diasporic writers keeping multicultural and multinational commitments upmost in their minds are well to be seen in Derek Walcott and V.S Naipaul. They do not get uprooted either at home or abroad. Derek Walcott, a Caribbean by birth keeps his multicultural obligation and at the same time shows fidelity to his African origin, and finally to America, where he settled later on. V.S Naipaul, on the other hand, has transformed his exile into an art and has been able to construct a sense of home in his state of being in-between. Sudesh Mishra in his essay “From Sugar to Masala: Writing by the Indian Diaspora” invariably captures the newest notion thus - “If the old diaspora can be identified through its melancholic withdrawal into zones of exclusivity, the new diaspora can be identified through its conscious occupation of border zones, exemplified by the uneasy interaction between gender, class, ethnicity, nation-states” (285). “Positive Nostalgia” is a term that has been linked with writers who have immigrated and who likely depict the pleasurable and positive side of diaspora. Bharati Mukherjee has talked about it. She in her article “Two Ways to Belong in America” says - “Others who write stories of migration often talk of arrival at a new place as a loss, the loss of communal memory and the erosion of an original culture. I want to talk of arrival as gain” (Khullar 43)

Leaving behind the generational consciousness of victimhood, suppression and marginalization the short fiction of Baldwin, Divakaruni and Lahiri aim at accomplishing and settling up in new places. Being true to the metaphor of ever expanding banyan tree.
symbolic of Indian diaspora, the fiction by these women show, how necessary it is to assume hybridity and trans-nationality. With the new tendencies set in motion it is inevitable to see Indian diaspora in the light of globalization, that has come of age — “The banyan tree has thrust down roots in soil, which is stony sandy marshy — and has somehow drawn sustenance from diverse unpromising conditions. Yet the banyan tree itself has changed; its similarity to the original growth is still there, but it has changed in response to its different environment” (Jayaram 15).

Diasporic writing replicate challenges, desire, and apprehension of a person who migrates to a new land. While illuminating the responsibility of immigrant writer, Stella Sandahl states: “He is the one who can convey experiences from different worlds, being himself part of different worlds. Complexity does not mean schizophrenia. We can and should contribute to the common culture and still remain ourselves” (qtd. in Naikar 173). Salman Rushdie in Imaginary Homelands says “I have spent much of my writing life celebrating the potential for creativity and renewal of the cultural encounters and frictions that have become commonplace in our much transplanted world” (67). Hence it is the task of newer generation of diaspora writers to open up their writing from enclaves of exclusivity and incorporate change.

Shauna Singh Baldwin’s stories in English Lessons forming the earlier part of her career exhibit issues of racism, questions of ethnicity and politics of gender. Her women such as Simran, Kanwaljit, Bibiji, Jassi and Devika, all first generation Sikh immigrant women are appropriate references about the friction between the two cultures. Both sides seem to be equally uncomfortable, though the diasporans have to make a greater effort in this process acclimatization. But in the evaluation of her later collection We Are Not in
Pakistan foregrounds much that is left unspoken in her earlier stories. The stories here marks a qualitative leap in Baldwin’s consciousness as she interrogates the identity of the Sikhs in the wake of more pertinent and recent issues such as 9/11 terrorist attack, the Iraq war, London bombings etc. Her women such as Naina, Uma and Kathleen are all second generation immigrants. The women portrayed by Baldwin here are talented, intelligent and analytical. They refuse to accept unquestioningly the rules fixed for them by out modeled culture and in doing so demolish the myth that women’s activities are essentially limited to certain spheres of life ascribed for women alone.

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni creates fictional diaspora narratives to emphasize the struggles of her immigrant women protagonists for self-discovery and new identity formation in America. We find such women in Preeti, Asha, Abha and to an extent in Sumita. Peter Nazareth in his critique of the stories by Divakaruni writes “In Divakaruni’s work, despite sex, class, and caste oppression, women need not end up as victims. America chips away at ossified Indian tradition, for people to see that the imperative of life is deeper than arranged marriage. America and India are twinnet” (819).

Though some among the diasporans may not want actually to return home, wherever the dispersal has left them (such as Sumita) they retain a conscious or subconscious attachment to traditions, customs, values, religions and languages of the ancestral home. Chitra Divakaruni’s sentiments in this regard are echoed in V.S Naipaul’s book, India: A Million Mutinies Now “cut off from their own people and cut off from India itself by distance, diasporic Indians "develop something they would never have known in India: a sense of belonging to an Indian community” (7).
The contrast between women who chose to stay back in India and those who have immigrated to America are sharply detailed in Divakaruni's stories. The women in stories that are exclusively set in India such as “The Bats”, “Maid Servant’s Story”, “The Lives of Strangers” and “The Names of Stars in Bengali” are characterized by restrictions and limitations. The wife in the story “The Bats” is a victim of domestic violence. With nowhere to go and no option of freedom anywhere in sight, she runs away only to return again to her abusive husband. In “The Maid Servant’s story” the wife, a rich Bengali woman of the aristocracy is cheated by her banker husband, as he stealthily sneaks into the maid servant’s room at night. These women are victims of the male hierarchy, prevalent in India wherein the male exerts the power to abuse and exploit them sexually. On the other hand women, who are already in America, influenced by the ideas of the west, as Divakaruni herself is influenced by western feminism, have their stories ending in positive note. The difference in predicament is largely brought about by the difference in geographical location. As contrasted to India, America provides them with more opportunity of choice, freedom and safety. Rose Kernochan in her review of *Arranged Marriage* notes –

Recently arrived from Calcutta, unsettled in Chicago and San Francisco, Divakaruni’s heroines are still half submerged in the dream world of Indian femininity, in innocence as still and dark as lake water. As America revives them, they rise to its challenges; the new freedom of their chosen country act on them like extra oxygen. (20)

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni’s exceptional psychological insight into the subtleties of human psyche is well rendered in an opulently reminiscent, inconspicuous and natural
style. The Indian immigrants, who shuttle between the two cultures, are seen involved in a quest for self-knowledge and a struggle for self-determination. Through her stories Divakaruni makes Indian women find ways of reconciling themselves to their shifting and evolving identities that are the result of their immigrant experience. We find that most of the women characters resolve the conflict by rejecting Indian norms and adapting themselves, to a certain extent, to the Western culture. This bears witness to the fact that Divakaruni is for assimilation and acculturation between two communities, the prevailing and the immigrant.

Living outside the homeland, it is the tendency of diasporic writers to keep writing about "home" returning home each time with his/her fiction. But Jhumpa Lahiri emphasizes on setting up home elsewhere and everywhere. The changes we come across when we scrutinize the two collections of stories are that, Lahiri has altered her fiction according to the changing times. The first generation immigrant characters such as Mrs. Sen, Mr. Pirzada, the unnamed narrator and his wife Mala etc in Interpreter of Maladies always suffer from a broad sense of nostalgia, and the first generation immigrants have a tendency to cling strenuously together in order to preserve their cultural, religious and linguistic identity. Preserving their identity is one of their chief concerns. On the other hand Ruma, Sudha, Sang and Hema in Unaccustomed Earth are citizens of the global world, with an itinerant heritage and fluid set of identities. Nigamananda Das observes –

...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: they seem to perceive and adopt 'new angles at which to enter the 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 (Das 16)

Her second collection of stories has gained prominence since it came at a time when the era of universal nomad seems to have dawned upon America, a country ruled by a non American black president who himself is symbolic of hybridity and transnationalism - “America the land of immigrants. We all go forth to seek America and in the seeking we create her and in the quality of our search shall be the nature of the America we create” (Seller 23). George Washington had once remarked –

The bosom of America is open to receive not only the opulent and respectable stranger but the oppressed and the persecuted of all nations, all the religion whom we shall welcome to participation in one of our rights and privileged, if by any decently and propriety conduct they appear to merit the enjoyment (Washington 19).

His words seem to be true, now that America has become a melting pot where the people and culture melt together to form a hybrid culture.

Lahiri through her women characters thus celebrates immigration and proposes that the hybrid identity adopted by the second and third generation immigrants/diasporans act as a liberating factor relieving them of the burden of loyalties, divided between the original and adopted homelands. The hybrid and hyphenated identities that they cheerfully bring in helps them to examine new possibilities and new ways of thinking
about their relationship with their native soil. This new notion can bring changes in the
received notions of diaspora identities and their modes of existence. Ann Hulbert in “The
New Global Nomads: Jhumpa Lahiri and the Perils of Assimilation” says

Assimilation that Lahiri sees in these stories is about coming to terms with
disorientation. It is about, not fitting in or settling down, not starting over from
scratch and freely forging a new identity or destiny. Her characters balance
precariously between two worlds - not just Asian and Western, but inner and
outer, traditionally circumscribed and daringly impoverished, unwilled and
willed... (n.pag.)

Evident from the works of Baldwin, Divakaruni and Lahiri is the fact that, there is
greater ability of the females to adapt, to assimilate and acculturate in a new environment.
As the veteran Bharati Mukherjee had remarked about her own women characters - “The
kind of women I write about ... are those who are adaptable. We’ve been raised to please,
been trained to be adaptable as wives and that adaptability is working to be woman’s
advantage when we come over as immigrants” (Agarwal 4). While as the male writers
fall back a victim to their sensibility to look back with nostalgia at the home and culture
left behind, women writers welcome the new found freedom in the new milieu which is
liberated from the constraints and restraints of phallocentricity customary back home.
“The cumulative efforts of the women writers prepared a new idiom of exile and empathy
and expended the horizons both of feminist fiction and the immigrant narrative”
(Agarwal 4). Responding to the stress and strain between the two worlds, these diasporic
women undergo a relative un-gendering process only to re-gender as strong-minded
individuals with a sense of true identity.
These women describe different experiences, different tales, "all moving under pressures, undergoing becomings, and venturing into new belongings" (Sinha i). The women characters imbibe the idea that in diasporic context, identity is never fixed; rather it is in a state of flux. Identities, like the uneven kaleidoscope images, are constructed, deconstructed and reconstructed regularly. They are always in the process of constitution. As Stuart Hall in "Cultural Identity and Diaspora" puts it –

Identities are never unified and in late modern times, increasingly fragmented and fractured, never singular but multiply, constructed across different often intersecting and antagonistic, discourses, practices and positions. They are subject to radical historicization, and are constantly in the process of change and transformation. (Hall 1)

This transformation in the constitution of the subjectivities of the women characters in the stories has been brought about largely by what Homi K. Bhabha in Location of Culture calls "third space", "hybrid" space or "in-between space" – a space in diasporic consciousness created by encounters of the immigrants with the new ways of life in a new culture. This space provides "the terrain of elaborating strategies of selfhood – singular or communal" and not only facilitates assimilation but also initiates identity formation (1). In such liminal zones we witness the breaking down of the binaries that create cultural identity, transform meaning making and hence gives rise to hybrid identities. Such moments of articulation are "unhomely, ghostlike, familiar yet unknown" (9) according to Bhabha – "In this displacement, the borders between home and world become confused, and uncanny, the private and the public become part of each other, forcing upon us a vision that is divided as it is disorienting" (9).
The immigrant women's voice echoed in the stories of Baldwin, Divakaruni and Lahiri are strong and loud capable of demanding a universal attention. The stories created by them have a potent emotional resonance that transcend what has been classified as immigrant/diasporic fiction and move towards a universality as characters struggle with concepts of identity and belonging. The works of the three women describe immigrant and diasporic experience from the point of view of feminine awareness. They write about patriarchal and political constraints, a legacy of their colonial homelands, and further talk about their experience as strangers in an unfamiliar western society. Their writing expresses and envisions ways of counteracting patriarchal dogma which according to them are repressive tendencies on the way to feminist growth.

The anxiety and pain undergone by the women in the short stories of Baldwin, Divakaruni and Lahiri, come not just from plain longing and loyalties, of divided affinities between the homeland and adopted lands, but also form immigration's link to colonialism and neo-imperialism. For women immigrants who are relocating from a place like India with the long lasting heritage of colonial subservience, the reverberation of the struggles between colonial and native powers are so strong that it poses a threat. The writers thus need to simultaneously negotiate between a heritage of resistance to colonialism and pressure of adopting to the colonial or imperial "other" as the new home. Hence as Chandra Talpade Mohanty suggest Indian women who are in the west cannot be categorized monolithically alongside western women. They are writers affected by displacement as well as by its consequence: colonialism, post colonialism, and neo-imperialism. The need of the hour is to bring in changes and perceive diaspora in a positive way —
The diaspora has now to be understood in terms of not a site of contestation where ignorant armies clash by night, but as a site of constellation- a space that provides equal weightage to the logic of exclusion as well as to the logic of identity. In other words it is not ‘dislocatedness that defines diaspora, but the ‘locatedeness’. It is this locatedness that can lead to a truly emancipatory diasporic space that can be seen as one of the many possible spaces within a spatial spectrum defying the overwhelmingly absolutist position of ‘internationalism’. (Pal and Chakrabarti 142)

The fiction by Shauna Singh Baldwin, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni and Jhumpa Lahiri are not just accounts of agony and distress of Indian immigrants across Canada and America but suggest fresh ways of thinking of the Indian diaspora and establishes newer cultural link decolonizing the hitherto present temperament of a ‘victim’ in the wake of globalised context. What their women undergo is a progression into social semiosis whereby people from India interrelate with the American or Canadian culture over a long period of time to produce new diaspora narratives.

The diasporans in today’s context, with profound uncertainties proudly realize that they will not be capable of reclaiming precisely the thing that was lost. The contemporary Indian diaspora “is not merely one of the most important demographic dislocations of the contemporary time; it represents a significant power in world culture” (Ghosh 244). Being true to the spirit of being a ‘nowhere man’ or the ‘citizen of the world’ diasporans assume the position of multitudes and pluralities. As Salman Rushdie in *Midnight's Children* says –
I no longer want to be anything except who I am. My answer: - I am the sum total of everything that went before me, of all I have seen done, of everything done to me. I am everyone; everything whose being-in-the-world affected was affected by mine. I am everything that happens after I have gone, which would not have happened if I had not come, I repeat for the last time: to understand me, you will have to swallow a world. (383)