But it was home. And though home is a name, a word, it is a strong
one; stronger than magician ever spoke, or spirit answered to, in
strongest configuration.

Charles Dickens, in *Martin Chuzzlewit*.

My broken family tree
Desiccates the wind.
Ringed, rimmed, and solitary,
Bequeaths its pain to me,
That I may rescind, resolve,
The fractured past…

Leela Gandhi, “Genealogy” in *Measures of Home*

Where Thou art - that - is Home -
Cashmere - or Calvary - the same -
Degree - or Shame -
I scarce esteem Location’s Name -

Emily Dickinson, in “Where Thou art - that - is Home”

CHAPTER 4

ONE’S OWN MEMORIES: JHUMPA LAHIRI’S

NARRATIVES OF HOME

4. 1. Diaspora, Ethnicity and Cultural Memory: Reading

Jhumpa Lahiri

In this penultimate chapter of the present study, we have arrived at an
encounter with a very significant area of contemporary ethnic literary
production in the United States of America. In its encompassing,
inclusive nature, this area may be heuristically classified as *immigrant* ethnic writing in America. Relatable to that is the idea of *diasporic* writing in America as well, with reference to literary production in certain American spaces which have been called *diasporic*. With the phrase ‘immigrant ethnic’ coupled with the word ‘America’, a certain popular notion, or perspective about migration, assimilation and subsequent probabilities of ethnic emergence (or ethnogenesis, as in the contemporary births of ‘new ethnies’, and not in its more scientific sense of the term) does come to mind, accompanied by images of generally impoverished travelers seeking asylum in a new land, and then labouring hard for acceptance (assimilation) and success (financial stability, foremost) in that new home. With the word ‘diaspora’ as well, a similar image of transnational identities, crossings, borders and spaces is brought to mind.

However, it is not the purpose of this study to indulge in an inclusive examination of the politics of immigrant ethnic spaces, or diasporic spaces within the United States (though both of these cannot be interchangeably viewed and are at the same time inextricable from each other) and the literary production in those contexts. Given the long history of migrant ethnic presence in America, it must be clarified that there are many divisions within that vast rubric of ethnic identification. Among the many immigrant ethnies in the United States, one of the most
significantly numbered is the Asian American ethnic population. The term ‘Asian American’ did not, as it seems, exist before the 1960s. It was Yuji Ichioka who coined it in the second half of the decade in order to supplant essentialist terms like ‘oriental’ and ‘Asian descent’. As Fujino writes: “When Ichioka introduced the term, “Asian American” in an AAPA meeting, he, perhaps only with partial consciousness helped launch a new identity” (2010: 703). Though the term ‘Asian American’ does not really, if the genesis of the term is considered, sublate the Indian American ethnie, yet I incorporate it within this discussion on the basis of purely geopolitical locationing, for India’s geographical proximity with China, or other homelands of Asian American ethnic diasporas. For, after the post-1970s proliferation of Southeast Asian migration in America, there are several different ethnic identities nestled within that particular socio-cultural space with naturalised Americans born and migrated from different countries in the Far East, Southeast Asia, or the Indian subcontinent. Very notable among these different immigrant cultural communities is the Indian American community which also, given the diversity of its ‘parent’ country, can be identified and located diversely on the basis of the different Indian backgrounds of its members.

Just as there are different ethnic divisions and sub-divisions in the context of Asian American ethnicity in America, so also there are
continually growing different and diverse voices emerging in order to narrate and document the immigrants’ differing experiences set against the multi-ethnic background of the United States. The experiences of a transnational displacement, a transcultural positioning, or the locationing of new identities forged in the pale of gradual acculturation and assimilation are primarily the objects of this sort of literary narrating. Though the nearly spasmodic (and understandably so) but significant literary production that writers from each of these different ethnies have made possible in the last three decades is still in its nascent phase, it cannot be but argued that it has actually re-fashioned the very lay of the land when it comes to contemporary American literature as it is. The question then arises naturally in the context of the present study as how cultural memory and its different concepts, and phenomena can be traced and examined in the context of immigrant Asian literature in America. What would be the areas of primary examination in this case, and how would the cultural memory of such ethnic spaces have been shaped and figured through the inferred processes of rememoration and commemoration which are, as the preceding chapters have demonstrated, primary and central to the transmission, configuration and refiguration of cultural knowledge and understanding of the past in the present.

This, of course, cannot be observed without a specific narrowing down of coordinates and parameters of cultural memory systems and structures.
specifically in the context of the ethnic constructions in question here, since the phenomenon of migration as a historical and mnemonic presence, transnationalism and transculturalism as potent forces of the present besides and in conjunction with critical issues of diasporic identity are important intervening factors whose presence would possibly re-modify and re-shape the dynamics of cultural memory as we have already seen it in the preceding case studies of American multi-ethnic literatures. And that is definitely possible, since cultural memory and the study of its systems cannot only be limited to only a fixed and unchanging model or set of theories. As the notions of cultural identity and the factors that go into its construction vary from space to space, and from culture to culture, so also does the definition of cultural memory reshape itself in keeping with the differing cultural pasts of different groups or ethnies, though, in a way, the primary assumptions and coordinates of cultural memory remain considerably constant in all cases. What is important to understand is the fact that a basic notion of cultural memory remains the same - that is the entirety of the possibilities and structures that facilitate the interplay of many pasts and the present in socio-cultural contexts. However, the ways in which this interplay manifests may be significantly different from context to context. This is precisely how the present tract will proceed; by examining and considering the diverse narratives of displacement,
transnational location, and diasporic identity in the context of migrant Asian ethnies in intersection with the dynamics of cultural memory.

In order that the focus of our study be narrowed down and concentrated, it is necessary that a more specific identification of our object of study be attempted here. The present chapter will, then, concentrate on reading and examining the writing produced by immigrant Indian Americans (referred to in popular parlance as ‘desi Americans’\textsuperscript{14}) in the light of cultural memory studies in order to trace and interrogate how such narrative productions can be read as important mediums of cultural memory. The case studies in this chapter are three texts from the work of Pulitzer Prize winning author Jhumpa Lahiri. These are the short story collections \textit{Interpreter of Maladies: Stories of Bengal, Boston and Beyond} (published in 1999) and \textit{Unaccustomed Earth} (published in 2008) besides her novel \textit{The Namesake} (published in 2003). These texts had been her total oeuvre until recently when Jhumpa Lahiri announced the publication of her fourth book, and her second novel \textit{The Lowland} (2013). Each of these texts in different ways reveals a multifarious ensemble of voices and cultural spaces which range from a downtown flat complex in the Indian metropolis of Kolkata to Pemberton Road in New Jersey and from the boulevards and streets of Massachusetts Institute of Technology to the streets of Paris and Italy. As memory narratives go, a preliminary reading of these texts by Lahiri may not
reveal a conscious hearkening back to ‘an ancient past’, or a re-
construction of an ancestral voice in the present. There is only a stark
narrative of the present interpolated with the ‘near past’ within which the
recent past of happenings, happenstance and circumstance operates,
providing referential points through which the characters realise the
enormity of their displaced, culturally dispersed lives.

However, deeply embedded within the narrative structures of the two
short story cycles (IOM and UE) is an entire gamut of mnemonic
signification which takes the form of different narrative strategies and an
altogether different rhetoric of memory than has been observed in the
preceding case studies included in this study. The first story collection
titled Interpreter of Maladies (cited hereafter as IOM) is an ensemble of
nine short stories some of which are narratives about migrant Indians
located in America (“Mrs. Sen’s” and “This Blessed House”) while
others are about Americans of Indian origin who are, at least for the
duration of the narrative, present in India (“Interpreter of Maladies”).
The primary narrative voices are of Indian origin, as it is. And only two
of the stories in the volume are narrated, or focused even on non-Indian
protagonists (“Sexy” and “Mrs. Sen’s”). Even then, at least most of the
central characters in those two stories are of Indian origin. The second
story collection titled Unaccustomed Earth (cited hereafter as UE) is
constructed differently than the first. It comprises two sections titled
“Part One” and “Part Two”, the first being a collection of five different short stories about intergenerational relationships, and the second a set of interconnected narratives about two people named Hema and Kaushik, both of whom have lived in both America and India, returning to and departing from both these places throughout their lives as depicted in the stories.

Lahiri’s other book, a novel titled *The Namesake* (cited hereafter as TN) again is a narrative about two generations of Indians living in America; Ashoke and Ashima Ganguli, who were both born in Kolkata and had migrated to the United States, and Nikhil (Gogol) and Sonali (Sonia) Ganguli, siblings and children of Ashoke and Ashima. The latter pair had been born in America and had very little by way of connection with their parents’ homeland except for the experiences of a different cultural space altogether garnered by them on occasional visits to India. The novel follows the trajectory of the life of Nikhil Ganguli, or Gogol, the central character in the narrative, whose American-born status and a relatable cultural development as a second generation Indian American clash with the socio-cultural spaces of his ‘homeland’ which he himself is a stranger to. For him, home is America, and his identity is American born Indian. However, things are not as simple as that, and Gogol has to come to terms with his ideas of home and belonging and negotiate with the fact that the cultural values he feels no affiliation to cannot be ignored or
erased from his association. These are aspects of his identity which he would never be able to abjure or disown, but then, he cannot also accept these cultural values and rituals in the same unbending manner of acceptance with his father and his mother have always done. The novel also follows Nikhil’s (Gogol’s) journey from a brittle confusion about his identity (about his own name, in particular) to a clear realisation of what it means for an Indian-origin individual named after a Russian author to exist and to survive as an American citizen and not as a migrant (though he definitely is a child of migrant parents) in the multi-cultural social landscape of the United States. Besides Gogol, the other characters of the novel, like Moushumi Mazoomdar, Gogol’s estranged wife who falls in love with an ex-colleague after she is married to Gogol, and Ashima Ganguli, Gogol’s mother, who, having lived all her married life in America, returns to her ‘homeland’ to live with her paternal family, are also representatives of the primary cultural anxiety that follows a migrant’s existence, or that of a child of migrant parents.

These characters that Lahiri creates in her novel, and in her other shorter narratives, are embodiments, to say the least, of a specific transcultural, diasporic existence which seems to form the onus of her fictional world. As typified characters that throng the pages of all these three different texts, it is difficult to assume that these characters may be part of memory narratives which may also function as mediums of cultural
memory. However, it is also not pertinent to dismiss them as only stock characters whose purpose is to represent the American born second generation Indian, or the Indian born first generation American. This is because Lahiri, through a skilful practice of distinctly mnemonic narrative strategies constructs mental and desire spaces regulated by acts of memory within which these culturally typical characters exist as representatives of different collaborating, as well as crossing socio-cultural paradigms. These acts of memory in her narratives usually operate on three different levels as it is. First, as intra-textual rememoration strategies which use rituals, names (good names and pet names), cuisines and sites of memory to enact a performance of remembering within the ambit of the narrative (e.g. the Annaprashan ceremony for Gogol in TN, or the intra-textual mentions of Indian cultural symbols alongside personal remembrances of America from the recent past, something which both Ashima and Ashoke do, often unconsciously, as the omniscient narration goes).

Second, as rhetorical strategies of memory in which the recent personal past coincides with the present in order to create a consciousness of other pasts (e.g. Gogol’s concern with his ‘daak naam’, his nickname the reason for which he is not aware of but the import of which he realises at the end of the narrative of TN, as well as Boori-ma’s assertions of a lost, prosperous past in undivided India in IOM). Third, through
commemorative strategies of intertextuality which operate at a different level than within the narrative emplotment (the incorporation of textual elements from Hawthorne in UE). Lahiri’s conscious use of intertextual elements from a strikingly American cultural past in order to construct her own narratives may seem apparently non-judicious at first glance for a reader whose ideas and impressions about diasporic writing may include a possible nostalgia for a uni-cultural past, a past which is associable with one’s ‘homeland’. However, a careful understanding of Lahiri’s narrative construction reveals that it is not so, for her narratives are not about Indians and their homelands but about displaced, migrated individuals who exist within a different cultural space altogether and are striving to negotiate between the polarities of belonging to a past homeland and of belonging to a new one. The textual strategies in these narratives would necessarily then import extant cultural texts of that new world of belonging and adherence, of course. Lahiri’s intertextuality thus does not exclude her Indian origins consciously, but instead proceeds towards the formation of a ‘third space’ which is definitely not Indian, but is not American entirely as well. It is the narrative space of a different cultural order which operates and negotiates between crossings, borders and homes; crossings like the ones Ashoke Ganguli makes between two continents, borders like Twinkle erects when she takes a sort of mundane delight in the Christian ‘blessings’ manifesting in her new house, and homes like the one the author herself fashions from
remnants of the pasts of her own nation which has formed for her a
distinct ethnic identity as an ethnic American. As Karen Cardozo says:

In rendering narrative boundaries permeable...intertextuality
destabilizes ethnic identity in its instantiation of new cultural,
geographic, and temporal logics...intertextuality generates a
“third space” in which the resonance between texts A and B
generate a new text, C, in the spacetime of reading...Homi
Bhabha and others have also used the “third space” metaphor
to describe postcoloniality, wherein the collision of indigenous
and colonial cultures generates new identities as social
formations. In the same that Lahiri’s protagonists are neither
South Asian nor easily American in relation to discourses of
ethnic or national authenticity, Lahiri’s writerly debts to Gogol
and Hawthorne challenge the limits of ethnic or literary
nationalism, requiring us to view her oeuvre in its own “third
space” (2012: 7).

The question that Cardozo raises about the destabilisation of ethnic
identity is pertinent here, though. In TN, Gogol’s identity as an
American is considered from the perspective of a white American, Lydia
who corrects her neighbour saying that Nick (Nikhil, or Gogol) is
American. However, she reaffirms her idea by questioning Gogol about
it. The ethnic identity of the author as well is questioned in a similar way
when the intertextual strategies she adopts in her texts are not, so to say,
Indian at all, but are more inclined towards an American or even Russian
set of instances. The destabilisation that occurs then is something that is
engendered in the readerly space, an approximation of ethnic givens,
which the author destabilises through her absorption of a cultural
memory of literary texts that is distinctly different from what may, or is
expected of her.
The complex ethnic nature of these texts used in the present tract may also be examined from the perspective of there being literary productions by, about or within a specific diasporic space that is American by nationality but not only American in nature and figuration. The author herself has been hailed as a diasporic Indian writer on more than one occasion, by many a forum, many a reviewer and many a book club in her ‘home’ country i.e. America as well as in her ‘homeland’ i.e. India. Academics working with Indian writing in English find it a suitable expression of critical inquiry to label her work as distinctly ‘diasporic’. My opinion is that such classifications are indeed essentialist and go against the very purpose of defining a ‘third space’ that is diasporic by nature and over and above that, is also not fixed but constantly shifting its own boundaries of determinate characteristics. But that is not to say that the idea of diaspora is indeterminate. It is not that at all. It is more the fact that the application of only the basic parameters of Homi Bhabha’s or Paul Gilroy’s definitions about a transcultural and transnational identity to a text and an author or to a specifically executed literary production is something that seems to fall short of a critical problematisation. Without that, as I see it, the notion of narrative interpretation or cultural criticism becomes reductive to say the very least.
What I would like to interject in this case is that within and besides the straight-cut, in vogue practice of labelling Lahiri as a diasporic Indian writer, there are other facets of interpretative potential that might be explored by considering this given, popularly accepted notion of diasporic writing in conjunction with a perspective of ethnic American identities. That is not to say of course that a dismissal of the notion of diaspora is being suggested here. My intent here is definitely not to try and destabilise that sort of readerly or critical notion about the author’s work, but to enquire and examine the dynamics of that sort of cultural and postcolonial reception in intersection with issues of an American ethnic identity and to examine how cultural memory manifests itself within that complex equation; an equation where the primary coordinates are distinct ethnic presences within a larger multi-ethnic framework and mnemonic cultures in those contexts. The idea of a diasporic identity enters that equation only secondarily, but is nonetheless equally important for critical inquiry. I will of course not argue for nor against the author’s work being classified as primarily ‘diasporic’ in this case, since that would defeat the very purpose of examining American multi-ethnic literary production that this study aims to do. I would rather seek to relate that notion of a ‘third space’ writerly enterprise with the predominant perspective of ethnicity that has been adopted in this study besides looking at how a distinguishable schema of mnemonic
signification within Lahiri’s narratives has rendered them into memory narratives, as mediums of the cultural memory of a migrant ethnic community within the American multi-ethnic landscape. The components of the methodology of that interrogation of the selected narrative case studies have been previously outlined.

*Diaspora*, as Linda Anderson says, is a term that has been used more specifically to “describe a non-essentialist identity or culture, which is ‘hybrid’, made up of different ‘crossings’ and difficult to ‘locate’ in terms of territorial alignments” (Anderson 2010: 272). Reading Lahiri’s narratives embedded with Indian American acculturation (UE and TN), and Indian portraiture (IOM), one may realise that the difficulty of locating and crossings that Anderson suggests is indeed not unfounded. Anderson continues on a different strain:

Contemporary discussions of diaspora, therefore, have tended to negotiate this complex terrain: acknowledging that there may be a personal dimension to exile or dislocation which involves a relation to a particular ‘locale’, while, at the same time, recognising the urgent need to interrogate the abstract terms such as ‘origin’, ‘place’ and ‘nationhood’ and the ideological weight they carry, in order to forge a political discourse capable of mapping new forms of identity. (2010: 273)

The ideas that Anderson holds forth on are again quite pertinent, not to say centrally significant, when one would try to examine the literary production of a migrant ethnic writer, who has also been read as a
diasporic writer, from the perspective of cultural memory since memory, as it is, is intricately associated with the notions of ‘place’, ‘origin’ and space. And cultural memory, in its aspect of embodied memory as such, would necessarily demand a stable understanding of those terms in order to be examined and analysed within narratives or texts. The only resort that would be relevant in this case would be to see how the primary acts of memory i.e. the act of recall and the instinct towards rememoration (within and of course outside of narrative production) aid towards the formation of a interactive cultural space for the agent of cultural recall, or amnesia, or forgetting (the remembering agent, here the ethnic American individual who is also a diasporic Indian living within America). The narrative that is being produced then becomes a location in itself, one which is constructed through a complex set of narrative strategies as explained before. The narrative acts of memory then become proponents of identity negotiation through mnemonic signification, a semiotic order of composites where recent pasts collide and cohabit with embodied cultural pasts and a consciousness of distancing, of crossings, and of boundaries that have been transgressed and cannot be recovered except through a sense of alienation and dislocation.

It is such a ‘memory agent’, the subject who participates in the acts of rememoration and commemoration within the narrative, which becomes
then the object of interrogation - where does the remembering agent stand in case of an ethnic cartography of a multicultural, multi-ethnic nation space. And it is here that Lahiri’s narratives of her ‘own’ memories and the representation of a distinct ethnic American cultural space with its irrevocable ties to a different, distant ‘homeland’ stand to be questioned. ‘Ethnic’ or ‘diasporic’ - that query is not easily resoluble given the complexity of territorial mappings and boundaries that such a formation subsumes within it. A possible solution may be both ‘ethnic’ as well as ‘diasporic’ since both parameters are not entirely untrue in the case of Lahiri’s work. However, the context of a multi-ethnic literary space may demand a more subtle assignation of coordinates. A probable final locationing of course is not possible in this case. What remains to be seen is how the metaphors of belonging, place and origin in this context may continue to shift and morph, thereby giving rise to different calculi of identities, to use a mathematical analogy, given its primarily ‘hybrid’ nature. As Stuart Hall says:

The diaspora experience…is defined, not by essence or purity, but by the recognition of a necessary heterogeneity and diversity; by a conception of ‘identity’ which lives with and through, not despite, difference; by hybridity. Diaspora identities are those which are constantly producing and reproducing themselves anew, through transformation and difference. (1990: 235)

In the midst of such differential complexities, one may assume and conjecture that Jan Assmann’s notion of ‘concretion of identity’ may
manifest itself through distinct mnemonic strategies, rememoration being primary among them. In spite of the potential of such a concretion, or objectivation being constantly present in this context, it is also pertinent to remember that the heterogeneity that Hall suggests as a primary component of the diaspora experience will constantly erode a static observation of the politics of belonging and acculturation within the subject space of an ethnic individual who is also diasporic, if not by intent, then by a complicit participation through familial and generational affiliation, as in the cases of Gogol Ganguli in TN, and Kaushik in UE, or the narrator from “The Third and Final Continent” in IOM. Belonging itself is politicised in these cases, as it is in many of Lahiri’s other narratives, and characters. As is location and place, besides cultural origins and dislocating processes of arrivals and departures. An intricate politics of locationality is evoked, thus, which is asserted on subsequent levels of narrative emplotment through different memory figures like migrant parents, and migrant rituals, besides distanced pasts and ‘homelands’ alongside memory symbols which evoke recent pasts, like the Nikolai Gogol book in TN which returns and reasserts its symbolic presence throughout the narrative of the novel. As Avtar Brah says:

…the notion of a ‘politics of location’ as *locationality in contradiction* - that is, a positionality of dispersal; of simultaneous situatedness within gendered spaces of class, racism, ethnicity, sexuality, age; of movement across shifting cultural, religious and linguistic boundaries; of journeys across geographical and psychic borders…I would describe the politics of location as a *position of multi-axial locationality.*
But politics is the operative word here, for multi-axial locationality does not predetermine what kind of subject positions will be constructed or assumed, and with what effects. (1996: 204-208, original emphasis)

The contradiction that Brah points out here is a situational contradiction that can be observed in case of Lahiri’s narratives very distinctly. It defines the very core nature of her narratives, of her characters and her narrative ‘locations’. This contradiction of locationality, through its ‘simultaneous situatedness’ can therefore be construed as the primary factor in the construction of these narratives as memory texts, or memory narratives. It is through these primal contradictions of space, place, and origin that a concretion of identity is reached, therefore. Rememoration, as it works in Lahiri’s narratives, is thus not only rememoration of a definite past but of different pasts which may have been known through familial transfer, or cultural transfer, but which may not have been known and experienced. A very inter-narrative illustration of how this may be said to occur would be the recounting in the novel’s narrative of how Ashoke Ganguli shaved his head while in America after his father’s death in India. This act is reflected in Mira Nair’s filmic rendition of the novel in that particular scene where Gogol Ganguli after receiving the news of his father’s death gets his own head shaved before reaching his mother Ashima Ganguli. While the focus shifts onto Gogol’s reflection in the salon’s mirror as the African American hairdresser shaves his head, there is a repeated interpolation of a rememorated scene from the
past where Gogol remembers seeing his father shave his own head in their house’ bathroom. On meeting Ashima, when he is told by her that the ritual shaving was not necessary, Gogol replies that he did it because he wanted to. The past that is being rememorated in this case is not only Gogol’s own past, but also, in a way, Ashoke’s past.

The ritual act of shaving the head by the son after his parents’ deaths is again a cultural text that Lahiri incorporates in the narrative with specific intent. The locational contradiction is again very evident in the scene with the generational and cultural difference between Ashoke’s and Gogol’s viewing of their respective fathers’ deaths. While for Ashoke, it is a custom, a ritual handed down to him through generations of cultural conditioning as a Bengali middle class Hindu born and brought up in Kolkata, as well as a way to mitigate and negotiate with the grief of his father’s passing several thousand miles away, for Gogol is a rememoration of his own father, since it really is not a ritual he would set much store by, being an American born second generation Indian. Gogol’s situating of his own identity as an American is pitted against by this ritual act of his which is particularly Indian and Hindu in practice and origin. And yet, the mnemonic poetics of this small incident within the narrative of the novel, and the film strongly restitutes the politics of cultural identity in this case. A distinct image of family and generation is created through this, besides an already extant politics of the ‘deep
history’ of translocation and transference evident in the collision between the diverse locationalities of culture in the contemporary (embodied by Gogol) and religious ritual as a means of cultural affiliation (embodied by Ashoke) manifested in this particular symbolic act of funerary mourning. Similar illustrations are of course observable throughout the three texts used in this chapter as case studies. However, a close reading of those narratives and their mnemonic mappings and emplotment would be necessary in order for those elements to be highlighted.

4. 2. Mnemonic Elements in Jhumpa Lahiri’s Memory Narratives

In Lahiri’s memory narratives, as I have called them previously, the politics of locationality and the semiotic orders of mnemonic signification operate in simultaneous contact with each other, each embellishing the other’s manifestation on the diverse levels of narrative stratification (the orders of narrative emplotment from the interrelation of characters to the interworking of narrative locales, or ‘places’). This occurs primarily at three specific levels which I have already enumerated previously. These are:
1) intra-textual *rememoration* strategies and acts which use rituals, names (good names and pet names), cuisines and sites of memory to enact a performance of remembering within the narrative, and evolves into narrative commemoration of cultural pasts

2) the rhetoric of memory in which the recent past coincides with the present in order to create a consciousness of other pasts which may be more distant, even ancestral, or cultural in nature, and

3) commemorative strategies of intertextuality which is, as previously mentioned, the primary way in which cultural memory works with literature.

The first two aspects will be examined in this segment of the present chapter while the third aspect will follow in the next segment which shall examine the intertextuality in Jhumpa Lahiri’s fiction. By intra-textual rememoration strategies, I mean to refer to narrative elements and schemas of narrative emplotment which use symbolic figures such as objects, places, and personages (semi-historical at least through association with historical events and places, like Mr. Pirzada in IOM) within the narrative to represent the interplay of the past and the present within the narrative ambit. This is something that is most evident and interestingly so in Jhumpa Lahiri’s short fiction, foremost. As an
illustration of how this occurs, I will use a close reading of Lahiri’s short fictional story titled “When Mr. Pirzada Came to Dine” from IOM with a specific demonstration of how rememoration contributes to the construction of a cultural memory of migrant ethnic spaces. The story is narrated against the backdrop of a very significant international crisis. It is the summer of the year 1971, and the narrator of the story, Lilia, is a girl of ten years.

The other character in the story, whose story the narrative primarily deals with, is Mr. Pirzada, who, as Lilia says, “came from Dacca, now the capital of Bangladesh, but then a part of Pakistan.” (Lahiri 1999: 24) This introduction to Mr. Pirzada is followed by a recalling of historic events concerning the liberation of the People’s Republic of Bangladesh from being a part of Pakistan, East Pakistan to be precise. Mr. Pirzada, who had been granted funds by the government of Pakistan in order to study the foliage of New England, is a newcomer in the city and is welcomed into Lilia’s parents’ house as a friend. Lilia, however, knows him only as ‘the Indian man’. Though Lilia herself is of Indian origin yet, even as a child, she is aware of this locational difference between her and Mr. Pirzada as well as herself and her parents who, as it is, are immigrants to America. However, this case of ‘mistaken’ locations is set right by her father who informs her with candid matter-of-factness that Mr. Pirzada is not actually ‘Indian’, he is Bengali, but he is a Muslim.
The narrative at this point turns into a distinct example of how the cultural trauma, or in this case, the collective influence of the Partition of India persists in Bengali cultural memory even when the narrative and the characters are ‘located’ far away in America, a land and a nation totally unconnected to the locations of the historical event. Lilia’s father says to her:

“Mr. Pirzada won’t be coming today. More importantly, Mr. Pirzada is no longer considered Indian…Not since Partition. Our country was divided. 1947.” When I said I thought that was the date of India’s independence from Britain, my father said, “That too. One moment we were free and then we were sliced up.” he explained, drawing an X with his finger on the countertop. “like a pie. Hindus here, Muslims there. Dacca no longer belongs to us.” He told me that during Partition Hindus and Muslims had set fire to each other’s homes. For many, the idea of eating in the other’s company was still unthinkable. (Lahiri 1999: 25)

The remembrance that Lahiri initiates in this story is an act of recall, a narrative act of memory that is also reflected in “A Real Durwan” through the character of Boori-ma whose endless recounting of the prosperous life she lost after Partition is also a narrative recall of the trauma of the Partition of India. That Lahiri uses this particularly significant event of Indian history in a fictionalised schema is something that deserves attention. For this is a historical event that has been represented in diverse ways in fiction, in poetry and in other genres as well by way of record, and by way of testimony. For it to occur in a story by a diasporic Bengali writer, and that too in connection to the narrative
voice of an American of Indian origin who has no idea of what Partition signified in the cultural consciousness of all Bengalis, and in their cultural memory is something that bespeaks a specific mnemonic strategy. Lahiri, it may be said, executes a singularly complicated (though apparently simplistic) narrative turn through this. Lilia’s mother is ‘proud’ of the fact that Lilia is an American and that she does not have to do all those things that they (Lilia’s father and herself) have had to do. 

The narrator’s voice comments:

In their 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. “Imagine having to place her in a decent school. Imagine her having to read during power failures by the light of kerosene lamps. Imagine the pressures, the tutors, the constant exams…” “How can you possibly expect her to know about Partition?” (Lahiri 1999: 27)

Lilia’s mother and father are migrant parents, located far away from their pasts, and their homeland, Bengal and India. However, the memory of the Partition is not far from their minds; they remember it as a time of unrest, as a time of terror, and as a culture which they would never want their daughter to exposed to. Also important is the fact that the story connects that distant moment in the history of the Indian subcontinent to another divisive event that takes place at least a few decades later (the war for Bangladesh’s sovereignty) at the time when the narrative takes place. These events which Lahiri incorporates in the story are events
which are interconnected on the level of the realpolitik that surrounded both of them and was a part of the aftermath that succeeded both of them, and at least in the cultural memory of all Bengalis across the globe and even in second generation diasporic spaces like the one in question here, both these events, and epochs are representative of a certain trauma that followed both of them, and that is the trauma of exile, of dislocation, and of a violent uprooting of ancestral cultures, lives, spaces and places. The rememoration that Lahiri effects in this story through a re-narration by way of dialogue and omniscient narration is indeed significant in the formation of the story as a memory narrative, therefore. Because the relation that she finally draws between all these different pasts (the Partition of India, the Bangladesh War and the migration of Lilia’s parents) is one that rememorates not only a historical event, or the trauma that represents it, and is a part of that event’s own culture, but a deeper consciousness of a more far-encroaching cultural fact, the endless influence of migration and of exile; this is reflected in the character of Mr. Pirzada whose occurrence in the story is one of a migrant to the United States. He is, as he himself says, “Another refugee…on Indian territory” (Lahiri 1999: 28). However, his disappearance from the lives of Lilia’s family and Lilia’s remembering him through his gifts of chocolates is something that speaks of a memory of dislocation, of ceaseless motion and translocation where meetings coincide, and pass, but the past of which this is a memory never remains the same. Through
A relatable reading may be attempted in case of the other story “The Real Durwan” as well by considering the memory figure of the refugee as a coordinate. In this story, the locale is the Indian metropolis of Calcutta (Kolkata) and the immediate location is an apartment building with tenants and residents who are representatives of an urban lower middle class whose basic class features are financial betterment and its apparent material embodiment. Among these people who are citizens of a newly formed, upwardly mobile nation is the presence of Boori-ma, who is again a refugee, or an exile to India. Living in abject poverty, in circumstances that resemble the archetypal refugee’s (if there is at all an archetype like that), Boori-ma’s character is one that in its loquacious representation and endearingly puerile (at least it seems so to the residents of the building who tolerate her stories of past grandeur, but not the suspicious situations that lead to her being evicted from the premises) character does not apparently seem to embody anything even remotely connected to the Partition and the pasts it participates in. However, the
fact that even the refugee status that she has achieved so difficultly is not
granted to her for a longer time. The eviction she suffered through the
Partition is effected again through the exile sentence she is handed by the
residents of the building. “(T)he details of her plight and losses suffered
since her deportation to Calcutta after Partition” (Lahiri 1999: 71) are no
longer relevant to her present situation, though the fact is that her exile
from the tenement is as harsh and unrelenting as her previous exile had
been for in both cases it had been eviction from a home she had shelter
in, even though in the second case, it was more of a refuge than a home.

Boori-ma’s mouth, as Mr. Chatterjee says in the story, is “full of ashes,
but she is a victim of changing times” (Lahiri 1999: 72). And indeed this
is so, for Boori-ma’s experiences as a refugee in a country torn by war
and strife are not easily understandable to the people around her. Lahiri’s
portrayal of her character as a person who “garbled facts…contradicted
herself…(and) embellished almost everything” (Lahiri 1999: 72) is
reminiscent and representative of the trauma that succeeds exile when
the violence of the past is meliorated and negotiated with by referrals to
a past which preceded that violent past, a past which cannot be
remembered except with nostalgia. Therefore, as the building’s wives’
‘collective surmise’ goes, Boori-ma “probably constructs tales as a way
of mourning the loss of her family” (Lahiri 1999: 72). Her last resort in
at the end of her life when she is a refugee among strange people who do
not care much about her is to negotiate with her past as best as she can, even if it is through apparent constructions of nostalgic fantasying. Lahiri’s narrative of Boori-ma’s story incorporates a very apparent contemporaneous account of a refugee, an exile whose life is replete with the landlessness and homelessness that was visited upon an entire culture, but it also reflects through the memory figure of the refugee the diffident mnemonics of exile which, to say the least, is something that pervades Lahiri’s work thoroughly.

This specific mnemonics of exile\textsuperscript{15} as I call it is not something that is only a resultant of the Partition of India, or the Bangladesh war, or any similar historical event in Lahiri’s narratives. It is also, as demographics and historical evidence will show, the accompanying aftermath of the post-colonial dislocation that has affected the Indian subcontinent since when, and that even in colonial times, the emigration of Indians began to amass strength. Much of what is now construed as Indian diaspora, which is not a feeble number, has its roots in this beginning of shifts from a homeland to other homes, voluntarily or involuntarily. Which is also not the case in point here, since the change that follows the migrant is at the end of the day always a compulsion, and never really a conscious choice. What is then rememorated, and unconsciously commemorated, then, is a past of motion, of dispersal and of dislocated homes, besides a complex dynamics of cultural amnesia-nostalgia which shapes and morphs the
identity of the present. In the narrative field of action, this is reflected in
the language of construction, remembering, recall and formation that
supplements the emplotment of memory figures within the story. Much
of what is being said about the past is, in fact, a reflection of the past, a
re-construction of its essence in the given present, even if it is only, as
some might say, the narrative present.

The memory figure of the migrant, or the exile, and the complex
mnemonics of its attendant narratives of displacement and dislocation (or
locations that contradict each other) are reflected continually in other
narratives in IOM, as well in UE. Lahiri’s first novel TN is also not free
from this influence of a cultural mnemonics. One of the most important
ways in which this is constructed in Lahiri’s narratives is through
intergenerational remembering, and familial rememoration. In much of
her fiction, Lahiri uses a narrative style that is experiential in parts and
omniscient as well which in turn facilitates a distinct generic bent of
narrative construction as mnemonic re-construction. As Astrid Erll says:

(The) experiential mode…is constituted by literary forms
which represent the past as lived through experience…evoke
the ‘living memory’ of contemporary history, generational or
family memories (that is, those forms of cultural remembering
which the Assmanns subsume under the ‘communicative
memory’).…Texts in which the experiential mode
predominates tend to stage communicative memory’s main
source: the episodic-autobiographical memories of witnesses.
(2011: 158)
Contrasting this particular mode of narration against what she calls the ‘monumental mode’ which “envisions the past as mythical” (Erll 2011: 158), Erll develops a theory of mnemonic narratology i.e. an intersectional model of how varying modes of narration may involve in the construction of different mnemonic narrations. What she says about the experiential form, which uses lived experience as memory (through rememoration and narrative acts of recall in the form of conscious narrative remembering) may then be held applicable in case of Lahiri’s narratives, especially in case of UE and TN. The intergenerational remembering that takes place in her story cycle titled “Hema and Kaushik”, and the infusing of specifically mnemonic chronotopoi in TN and IOM are also, as Erll says, a generic strategy employed by such mnemonic modes of narrative. Erll continues on this matter:

Typical forms of this mode of literary remembering are the ‘personal voice’ generated by first-person narration; addressing the reader in the intimate way typical of face-to-face communication; the use of the more immediate present tense; lengthy passages focalised by an ‘experiencing I’ in order to convey embodied, seemingly immediate experience; circumstantial realism, a very detailed presentation of everyday life in the past (the effet de réel turns into an effet de mémoire) [original emphasis]; and finally the representation of everyday ways of speaking (sociolects, slang, and so on) to convey the linguistic specificity and fluidity of a near past. (my emphasis)... (2011: 158-159)

Erll’s identification of these features of the mnemonic narrative mode of experience includes in its social aspect of rememoration that
'locationality by contradiction' which Avtar Brah mentions as the marker of “a positionality of dispersal; of simultaneous situatedness” (1996: 204-208). What Brah takes into account is the material aspect of diasporic experience, and the mediality that it necessarily evokes. However, the representation, or to say the incorporation of that mediality within a narrative commemoration of cultural memory (or memories) is again exactly what constitutes the embodiment of cultural memory through commemorative practices, narrative being one of those primary ways, and mediums of cultural memory. The rhetoric of memory that ‘witnesses’ and ‘narrates’ the past within the narrative, besides the intra-textual strategies of rememoration which collaborate to represent the reconstruction of the past within the narrative structure of the story, or the novel, or the story cycle, as the case may be, forms integral parts of this generic classification that Erll uses in her narrative-mnemonic model.

What is significant in this case is the identification of what Erll calls ‘the near past’ as a part of this commemorative narrative practice besides the use of ‘the more immediate present tense’. (2011: 158-159) About literary uses of chronotopoi, M. M. Bakhtin says:

> In the literary artistic chronotope, spatial and temporal indicators are fused into one carefully thought-out, concrete whole. Time, as it were, thickens, takes on flesh, becomes artistically visible; likewise, space becomes charged and responsive to the movements of time, plot and history. This intersection of axes and fusion of indicators characterizes the artistic chronotope…the chronotope as a formally constitutive category determines to a significant degree the image of man.
in literature as well. The image of man is always intrinsically
chronotopic. (1981: 84-85)

Erll includes the figure of the chronotope in her structure of mnemonic
narrative modes because of the important role it plays in the formation of
narrative structures in post-modern fiction. In Lahiri’s work, this is
profoundly observable, especially in her rememoration of place and
personae. An example would be Gogol’s recalling of the near past in the
form of his father (and his father’s pasts which associate with the figure
of Ashoke Ganguli in Gogol’s consciousness) and the childhood home
on Pemberton Road he returns to on the eve of his mother’s departure
from America. This is not ‘adventure-time’ as per Bakhtin’s
terminology. This is more like a ‘chronotope of meeting’ (again
modifying Bakhtin’s term), an encounter of the near past with the
immediate or occurring present.

In Lahiri’s narratives, we find substantial evidence of that. Consider this
portion from her novel TN where Gogol and Moushumi are seen in their
penultimate stages of wooing:

And yet he has the feeling that he has been to a few of her
birthdays, and she to his. That weekend, at his parents’ house,
he confirms this; at night, after his mother and Sonia have
gone up to bed, he hunts for her in the photo albums that his
mother has assembled over the years. Moushumi is there, lined
up behind a blazing cake in his parent’s dining room. She is
looking away, a pointed paper hat on her head. He stares
straight the lens, the knife in his hand, poised, for the camera’s
benefit, over the cake, his face shining with impending
adolescence. He tries to peel the image from the sticky yellow backing, to show her the next time he sees her, but it clings stubbornly, refusing to detach cleanly from the past. (Lahiri 2004: 207)

The immediate nature of the present tense in this paragraph from TN attests to the interplay of the near past with the present. Whereas Gogol cannot break from the past which he associates with his parents’ home (this particular event takes place within that site of memory which he cannot accept as part of his present, and which, yet, he cannot let go of since it holds the key to his identity as Gogol Ganguli), Gogol also cannot come to terms with the idea of that past event (his birthday, embodied by the photograph) being part of his present with Moushumi. The near past (his birthday and a young Moushumi) and the present (his wooing of the adult Moushumi) collide in a non-linear manner and the result of that colliding of pasts and memory is signified in the stubbornness of the photograph which is an image of the past to not detach from the past. Another example of this narrative reconstruction of the near past through the specific strategy of the present tense and the symbolic restitution of medial rememoration in the narrative would be this paragraph from the very end of the narrative of TN where Gogol is browsing through things in his parents’ house before the eve of Ashima’s departure. It is Christmas, and very nearly possible that his mother may not see another one like this the coming year since she would not be in the country then. The narrative breaks from the present reportage of
events into an overview of the past, again a mnemonic strategy that subsumes both intra-textual rememoration and commemorative rhetoric. Consider this: “And then another book, never read, long forgotten, catches his eye. The jacket is missing, the title on the spine practically faded. It’s a thick clothbound volume topped with decades-old dust.” (Lahiri 2004: 288-289) In encountering the pasts he has lived through, Gogol also comes to encounter his father’s past in the form of the book that his father had given him with specific intent on his fourteenth birthday, in order to communicate to him a memory of his (Ashoke’s) own life in India (the train accident which actually motivated him to seek greener pastures abroad). This is a rememorative act that Lahiri portrays on the part of Ashoke Ganguli. The narrative continues: “The ivory pages are heavy, slightly sour, silken to the touch. The spine cracks faintly.... *The Short Stories of Nikolai Gogol* (original emphasis) ‘For Gogol Ganguli,’ it says … in his father’s tranquil hand...” (Lahiri 2004: 288-289) This is Gogol again, and an intrusion of memories from the past where there had been a rupture that Gogol himself had initiated by breaking with his nickname and officially adopting his other name Nikhil which led to his being imposed with his ‘Nick’ name. This encounter with the near past, again, is reported in the present tense, suggesting immediacy with the near past that is embodied through the book that his father had gifted him. The description of the inscription that his father had appended to his gift continues after this:
“The man who gave you his name, from the man who gave you your name” is written within quotation marks. Underneath the inscription, which he has never before seen, is his birthday, and the year, 1982. His father had stood in the doorway, just there, an arm’s reach from where he sits now. He had left him to discover the inscription on his own, never again asking Gogol what he’d thought of the book, never mentioning the book at all. The handwriting reminds him of the checks his father used to give him all through college, and for years afterward, to help him along, to put down a security deposit, to buy his first suit, sometimes for no reason at all. The name he had so detested, here hidden and preserved - that was the first thing his father had given him. (Lahiri 2004: 288-289)

“The man who gave you his name” is obviously the author Nikolai Gogol whose name was given to Gogol at his birth because the letter from the grandmother bearing the proposed names never reached the Gangulis in time for the birth certificate’s being written. “The man who gave you your name” is, then, Gogol’s father, Ashoke Ganguli, who had actually given his son his names, both the one he detested and the one he took on in order to be seen as a Bengali in America, for, as Gogol himself saw it, the name ‘Gogol’ wasn’t simply ‘Indian’ enough. This simple act of inscription is a nearly non-visible act of rememoration that subsumes different pasts within its apparently non-complicated exterior. It is, in fact, an extension of the pervasive mnemonic signification that spans the entire narrative of the novel beginning from Gogol’s life as a ‘child of America’ to when he realises that he is also, after all, a child of migrant parents, and that too at a moment when one of the “givers and keepers” of his name “are far from him now. One dead. Another, a
widow, on the verge of a different sort of departure, in order to dwell, as his father does, in a separate world.” (Lahiri 2004: 289)

The narrative of TN, like it is with IOM as well, thus achieves the structure of a deeply interworked memory narrative through these narrative acts of memory interconnecting the choice of genre, of narrative diction and strategy along with symbolic embeddings of memory objects and sites like the Bengali Hindu rituals that become part of Gogol’s consciousness as he grows from the child of migrants to a child of America and then into an American. The Annaprashan ceremony, and the funerary ritual of shaving his head, besides the marriage ceremony where he wears his father’s clothes in order to participate in a Hindu course of rituals which neither he himself, nor his wife Moushumi seem to be able to take to in the same way that his parents had. An illustration of that is the way in which their marriage ends, of course. But then, it must be realised that to portray different generations with different cultural and ethical standards is not the author’s aim in the narrative. It is rather the fictionalisation of different locationalities and their contradictions that Lahiri attempts in TN. As it is with IOM, where the narrating voices and the other characters and their fictional ambits are commemorations of the differing cultural spaces each lives in, be it Elliot in “Mrs. Sen’s”, the narrator in “The Third and Final Continent” or even Twinkle in “This Blessed House”.
In UE, especially in “Part Two”, the narrative assumes the character of an intimate past tense reported, as it were, from the present. There is a sense of reaching back into the near past, where Hema speaks, as in “Once in a Lifetime”, to Kaushik, and he, in “Year’s End” to her, much like George and Cocoa in Gloria Naylor’s *Mama Day*. The sort of focalisation that Erll speaks of is not exactly present here, though it is an intimate rendition of the intertwined pasts of Hema and Kaushik. Like Kaushik speaks in “Year’s End” to Hema, saying:

> You would have been in college by then, on Christmas vacation as I was. But I remembered you not much older than Rupa, and I remembered a day after a snowstorm, when something I’d said caused you, like Rupa and Piu, to cry. I had hated every day I spent under your parents’ roof, but now I thought back to that time with nostalgia. Though we didn’t belong there, it was the last place that had felt like a home. (Lahiri 2008: 291)

The focalisation that happens in these parts of the narratives in UE is one that encompasses both Hema and Kaushik. Each narrator in their respective narrations speaks of what the other would have done if they had been present in the event that is being narrated, or of what they had done earlier which had reminded the narrator of the other in the event of their absence. The act of conscious recall pervades both points of view and does indeed lend to the mnemonic signification in the entire story cycle with its interconnected (at least on the level of the characters’ construction) narrative focus. The intergenerational portrayal that
persists through parts of the entire set of narratives in UE (in the first
story “Unaccustomed Earth” and in “Hell-Heaven”) as well as the ethnic
experience in the others are commemorated, again in the experiential
mode, by Lahiri in a way that attests to the mnemonic narrative model
she constructs in her other two texts. The ‘near past’ and the ‘immediate
present tense’ of the experiential mode are prevalent and pervasive in
most of the other narratives in UE as well. Consider these portions from
the narratives in UE:

He stared out the window at a shelf of clouds that was like
miles and miles of densely packed snow one could walk
across. The sight filled him with peace; this was his life now,
the ability to do as he pleased, the responsibility of his family
absent just as all else was absent from the unmolested vision
of the clouds. Those returns to India had been a fact of life for
him, and for all their Indian friends in America. Mrs. Bagchi
was an exception. She had married a boy she’d loved since
girlhood, but after two years of marriage he was killed in a
scooter accident. At twenty-six she moved to America,
knowing that otherwise her parents would try to marry her off
again. She lived on Long Island, an anomaly, an Indian
woman alone. (Lahiri 2008: 8)

This is Ruma’s father’s point of view narrated in an omniscient mode
here in the story “Unaccustomed Earth”. The ‘returns to India’ he recalls
are vestiges of a past that has become too distant for him now that his
wife, Ruma’s mother, is dead. His recounting of that point of separation
in the past coincides here with a recalling of a point of meeting in the
nearer past, his knowledge of Mrs. Bagchi, and how he met her. This is a
rememorated near past that achieves a commemoration of contradictions;
those of culture and those of locationality. Similar instances abound in
the other stories as well. Like in this one from “Part Two”:

There were countless images, terrible things she’d read about in the newspaper and never had to think about again. Buses blasted apart by bombs, bodies on stretchers, young boys throwing stones. He had witnessed these things, unseen and uninvolved, yet with an immediacy she had never felt. Because he had become her lover, these images upset her. Kaushik had told her about fellow photographers who were killed on the job, about the time an Israeli police officer bashed his camera in his face. And she was secretly glad, as his mother would have been, that his work would soon be different, that he would be behind a desk in Hong Kong presiding over meetings. That he would not be constantly in harm’s way. (Lahiri 2008: 315)

Though this is not mnemonic narration apparently, yet there is a suggestion of connect between Hema’s and Kaushik’s pasts here. The narration takes on a descriptive mode in this section of the narrative and thereby renders that connect between the two characters into a narrative strategy of ambivalent recall, in this case the medium being a narrative of visual embodiments of the near past, a narrative which describes visual images of the past at its most apparent level of communication. An estimation of the narrative-mnemonic elements in UE would not be complete without an examination of the appended epigraph from Hawthorne’s Introductory to The Scarlet Letter titled “The Custom House”

Human nature will not flourish, any more than a potato, if it be planted and replanted, for too long a series of generations, 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.”
(Lahiri 2008: unnumbered page)

The appending of this quotation from Hawthorne’s classic illustrates the general themes of loss and new generations taking root through displacement and dispersal (the notion behind the word ‘diaspora’ is also one of dispersal, as the word ‘diaspora’ comes from the Greek ‘diaspeirō’ which literally means to ‘scatter across’) both of which occur throughout UE, especially in the stories from “Part One” of the book. At this point, however, it is necessary for us to turn to the third aspect of Lahiri’s memory work i.e. intertextuality and commemoration which will lay bare yet another way of looking at how the cultural memory of an ethnic American space is being commemorated through the mechanism of intertextual reference and allegorical incorporation of extant texts from American literature (not from a specifically ‘ethnic’ American literature, but what may be called in a very generalised, and misappropriated manner, the ‘mainstream’ of American literary production).

4. 3. Gogol, Hawthorne, Lahiri: One’s Own Memories,
One’s Own Generation

There obviously is a pun on the word ‘generation’ in the title to this section of the chapter. While it may denote, more popularly, of course, a
single step in an unbroken line of descent within a group of genetically related individuals, (as in second generation Americans), the word may also be taken to connote a coming into existence, a creation or a making (as in the generation of ideas, or texts, for that matter). The obvious duality in the title has its own intent here, with a purposeful ambiguity of meaning attached to it. Both the meanings ascribed to this one word act significantly within the dynamics of cultural memory in a literary text as it is, and especially in the context of Jhumpa Lahiri’s work. While the first meaning may lead to an interpretation of the secondary portion of the title as the memories one has of one’s own generation (as in the second generation remembering its predecessor generation, like Gogol’s recalling his father’s past in TN), the second meaning may lead to this being interpreted as the memories one generates on purpose, through a willing act of subscription to a specific difference of cultural memory.

By difference of cultural memory, I of course mean to connote the contradictions that are both inherent and acquired in case of a displaced culture, a dispersed locationality. With one’s ‘locations’ being displaced, and continually reinvented, there must, by nature of mnemonic mediation, occur diverse and dynamic changes in the cultural memory that one’s identity is confirmed by. And in the context of ethnic constructions and multi-ethnic cultural geographies in America, this is especially a relevant line of observation that one must adopt and examine. However, the term ‘generation’ may also have a different
ascription to itself, something is also relatable to our present discussion.

As Jürgen Reulecke says:

A new understanding of the term which originated in the humanities and social sciences has now become common, however, which defines “generation” as a group within a society that is characterized by its members having grown up in the same particularly formative historical era. Often, such a generational identity exists throughout its members’ lives due to their having experienced times of radical upheaval and new beginnings (primarily in adolescence) and as a result sharing a specific habitus (the “imprint hypothesis”)…The term “generationality” gets at the particular features of this identity and has a twofold meaning. On the one hand, it refers to characteristics resulting from shared experiences that either individuals or larger “generational units” collectively claim for themselves. On the other hand, it can also mean the bundle of characteristics resulting from shared experiences that are ascribed to such units from the outside, with which members of other age groups—and often also public opinion as expressed in the media—attempt, in the interest of establishing demarcations and reducing complexity, to identify presumed generations as well as the progression of generations. (2008: 119)

The generation of cultural memory, and the generation that rememorates and commemorates, for that matter, are negotiated with by what Reulecke says here. In case of the generations (the first connotation of the term, and akin to the meaning Reulecke assigns to it) that Lahiri represents in her fiction (characters like Nikhil Ganguli-Gogol Ganguli, Moushumi Mazoomdar, Hema, Kaushik, Lilia, Twinkle and others in all the three texts studied in this chapter) the above is particularly true. The generation of new cultural spaces, that of the American born Indian origin individual in this case, is not something that results only through
dislocation, or diasporic locationing. It is the outcome of an ethnic
ascription that is born of the influence of the nation-state-culture on
those ‘new’ Indians, or Americans. There is a construction of
contradictions on all possible levels in this case; the second generations
of immigrant Americans are actually ‘children of America’, but there
also is a distinct location of the distant ‘homeland’ of their parents’
generation in their cultural situationing. Without it, there cannot really be
a particularity about their identities as posited against the larger backdrop
of a fast metamorphosing multi-ethnic nation like the United States.
This, therefore, is a new generation whose memories of the past are also,
in a way, memories of their own generation, their own memories born
out of contradiction, assimilation and cultural refashioning.

In this light, the construction of literary texts, and the dynamics of their
production must also naturally be influenced by this ‘refashioning’, this
new space of contradictions, and of ‘contradictions in locationality’.
Jhumpa Lahiri’s texts are particularly significant examples of this
refashioned ‘third space’ which lies between the other, distant, past
‘homeland’ of the migrant generation and the present, new national
space that the individual exists with, and within. In order to understand
the production of such texts which are instances and representations of
such a cultural space, one must look to the antecedents that the
production must have been modelled in connection with. In this case, it
is the cultural memory of the literary text that must be observed and examined. As previously mentioned, the cultural memory of the literary text is its intertextuality. Quoting Lachmann might be necessary here, even at the cost of being repetitive. About intertextuality and cultural memory Lachmann says:

Involvement with the extant texts of a culture, which every new text reflects (whether as convergence or divergence, assimilation or repulsion), stands in a reciprocal relation to the conception of memory that this culture implies. The authors of texts draw on other texts, both ancient and recent, belonging to their own or another culture and refer to them in various ways. They allude to them, they quote and paraphrase them, they incorporate them. “Intertextuality” is the term conceived in literary scholarship to capture this interchange and contact, formal and semantic, between texts—literary and non-literary. Intertextuality demonstrates the process by which a culture, where “culture” is a book culture, continually rewrites and retranscribes itself, constantly redefining itself through its signs. Every concrete text, as a sketched-out memory space, connotes the macrospace of memory that either represents a culture or appears as that culture…(2010: 301)

And, after that, about the connection between intertextuality and cultural spaces, she continues with a deliberation about how the formation of the ‘memory of a text’ is attained and constituted through the act of writing, and about how in between the ‘cultural text’ and the ‘written text’ there occurs a traversal between spaces. This may, then again, be likened to an act of rememoration leading on to the formation, or configuration of a medium of cultural memory. Lachmann says:

The memory of the text is formed by the intertextuality of its references. Intertextuality arises in the act of writing inasmuch
as each new act of writing is a traversal of the space between existing texts. The codes to which the elements intertwined in intertextual discourse belong preserve their referential character in relation to a semantic potential and to cultural experience. Cultural memory remains the source of an intertextual play that cannot be deceived; any interaction with it, including that which is skeptical about memory, becomes a product that repeatedly attests to a cultural space. (2010: 304)

In Lahiri’s fiction, the intertextual elements of the narrative are part of the mnemonic signification in both inter-textual and paratextual ways. For example, returning where we left off from the last section, one of the primary instances of how that works in case of her story collection UE is the appending of the quotation from Nathaniel Hawthorne’s “The Custom House”. Though the quotation does reflect the twin and interrelated themes of familial loss and dispersal (as pointed out in the last section), yet it is also pertinent to say that the quotation as a precursor to the text is not the only significant mnemonic element that must be examined in this case. There is a composite cross-cultural connectedness that is being played up in this case along with the title of the book, and the first story in it as well, being drawn from the quotation in question. As Cardozo says:

As with her reference to Nikolai Gogol, this epigraph similarly challenges any easy presumptions about ethnic identity or literary genealogy in Lahiri’s oeuvre. Whereas the intertextual gesture in The Namesake boldly situates Lahiri within an international pantheon of superlative fiction writers, this reference to Hawthorne, among the most canonized writers in American literature, seems an unabashed bid to ‘claim America’… (but) it offers something more complex, emphasizing the colonial narrator’s awareness - despite his
WASP pedigree - of the risks of genealogies that are too homogenous or parochial. (2012: 6)

One cannot help but be inclined to agree with what Cardozo says. But that is only at the apparent level of readerly receptivity. A close reading of the narratorial intent would of course suggest, as Cardozo says, something more ‘complex’, or it may be that it would fit in as a perfect missing piece in the context of the mnemonic narrative strategies that Lahiri incorporates in her fiction. I am of the opinion that it is not a bid to ‘claim America’; that in itself is an essentialist motive to enhance an ethnic otherness. It is more of the absorption or assimilation (to use a theoretically significant word) of a different cultural mnemonics (in case of literary production) which, in spite of the transplantation that takes place, if one can use that word, leads to a growth that may not be continual in the context of either of the ‘other’ two spaces, but is definitely a metamorphosis of ethnic identity reflected in literary production. In this context, it is necessary to quote, even in passing, what Hawthorne himself says in another part of “The Custom House”. He says: “In part, therefore, the attachment which I speak of is the mere sensuous sympathy of dust for dust. Few of my countrymen can know what it is; nor, as frequent transplantation is perhaps better for the stock, need they consider it desirable to know.” (Hawthorne 1876: 15) Aleida Assmann elaborates on the quotation that Jhumpa Lahiri uses in the epigraph of UE by commenting on the nature of place and space in this
context. She says, after using this particular quotation from Hawthorne, that

(m)odernity, among other things, requires the competence of mobility; giving up local traditions, shifting positions, building up ever new links in a dynamic network of relations. This implies a re-evaluation of the environment which I would like to characterize as a shift from qualified place to functional space. It is important, however, not to consider place and space as objective entities but as ‘arguments’; the terms are invested with value or divested of it as the constitutive cultural framework changes. (A. Assmann 1999: 60-61)

Assmann’s position in this case defines the reason why Lahiri specifically uses Hawthorne’s comment from “The Custom House” in order to signal the beginning of the narrative of UE, besides using it to formulate the title for the book as well. It is an America that the characters in Lahiri’s narratives (in all the three texts, for that matter) know as their new home, even though they are born there. This consciousness is something that is a transferred notion of place, a contradiction in itself. However, it must be remembered that it is precisely this sort of contradictions and this variety of a refashioned past that goes into the reification of a diasporic ethnie like the Indian American ethnie, or the Bengali American ethnie, for that matter.

There was a reference to Lahiri’s novel TN earlier in the context of Cardozo’s commentary on the intertextual elements of Lahiri’s writing. The reference would of course have been to the epigraph, again, that
Lahiri uses in TN, which is from Nikolai Gogol’s “The Overcoat”. The lines of that epigraph go thus: “The reader should realize himself that it could not have happened otherwise, and that to give him any other name was quite out of the question” (Lahiri 2004: unnumbered page). The allusion here is of course to the matter of Gogol’s name, which runs very importantly throughout the entire narrative of the novel and ends, as it were, with its end. However, it is not only that citation and connection to narrative configuration besides the purported connection to a ‘superlative world writer’ that is being suggested here. The ideate in this case is much more deeply embedded within the narrative structure, and the mnemonic fashioning is much more complex than this simplistic reasoning of ethnic identity being morphed by historical and social forces of the past as Cardozo suggests. The connection, and the significance of the epigraph to the novel is again, as I feel, more mnemonic than being a politics of ethnic identity. Very briefly saying, it is part of the mnemonic signification that foregrounds the connection between pasts (in this case the past of Ashoke Ganguli and the past of Gogol Ganguli) and pronounces, through a symbolic utterance signaling the generationality embodied by the name ‘Gogol’ whose presence as an author read by the characters and as a literary precursor of the author herself. To expound on this opinion, I call Nikolai Gogol Lahiri’s ‘literary precursor’ obviously not because of any chronologically situated or formulated literary continuity but because of the fact that both these writers (and
their texts in question) represent in differing ways a connection between the past of an individual and their present, and the ways in which free will predominates the succession of the future that every human being lives, or wants to live. Allusions to Nikolai Gogol’s short story can be found everywhere in TN. Gogol receives his name from the author Nikolai Gogol (the inscription to his father’s gift says “the man who gave you his name”). Ashoke is saved by the rescue team because he clasps a page from Gogol’s book after the accident. Gogol’s high school teacher Mr. Lawson narrates a brief but scary (to Gogol, at least) biography of the writer as he assigns the story to Gogol’s class. But the most important connection between the two texts is the fact that Gogol Ganguli changes his name just as Akaky Akakievich changes his overcoat. Both Gogol and Akaky are born without a name selected beforehand. Akaky is named because his father was also Akaky. Gogol is named because his father was saved by a page from the author’s book, and believed that “we all came out of Gogol’s overcoat” (Lahiri 2004: 78).

The intertextual elements in Lahiri’s narratives extend far beyond just literary allusions and precursors. She also uses a significant number of American cultural texts in the narrative construction of her short fictions. For example, from the very title of the story “This Blessed House”, the character of Twinkle in that story and the house itself being ‘blessed’
with marital bliss, it is possible to conclude about the intertextual connection between Lahiri’s story and the title of Coventry Patmore’s famous narrative poem “Angel in the House”, and to other texts like Thomas Hardy’s *The Return of the Native* and Kate Chopin's *The Awakening*. After Patmore, the term ‘angel in the house’ became associated with women of faith and substance whose presence in a household brought peace and prosperity, a typical Victorian ideal of the subjected feminine which saw the woman of the house as responsible for the blessings that came to it. As Maurice Montabrut says about Patmore’s poem,

> The Angel in the House appears as richly polysemic, each meaning stemming from the Latin Angelus…the Angel is no doubt the ‘destined’ or ‘predestinated’ maid that initiates one of the few moments of awakening and revelation in a man’s life: a foreshadow of heavenly grace is then given lovely incarnate shape in woman, here called Honoria, a victorianisation of one of the major abstractions of courtly lyric or romance (*Honour*). In Patmore’s poem Honoria is thus to Felix (the happy wooer) what Beatrice was to Dante…(Montabrut 1994:145-146)

It is probably the same thing with Twinkle and Sanjeev. While Twinkle’s and Sanjeev’s discovery of the blessings on their house (embodied by the number of Christian objects they find hidden in it) is not seen in the best light by Sanjeev, his observation of his wife’s enthusiasm at those discoveries makes him relent and accept those in the view that it would be necessary to reach a melioration in order that the house remained blessed, and in peace and in marital bliss. Lahiri’s use of this particular
allusion extends to some of her other stories as well, like in the character of Sudha in the fourth story from UE. Sudha dissociates herself from the ‘undesirable’ influence of her alcoholic brother and chooses only ‘goodness’ above the rest. Hers is definitely a role of ‘the angel in the house’, through whom goodness descends onto the family. Also comparable to this is the character of Ashima Ganguly in TN, whose only role and object throughout the years of her existence in America was to bring sustenance to her family and to be a devoted Hindu Bengali wife to her husband.

In Jhumpa Lahiri’s fiction, thus, a difficult mnemonics is consolidated and is re-constructed through narrative convention and emplotment. The mnemonics of home and of exile (as previously mentioned) meander ceaselessly throughout all her narratives, in the short fictions as well as in the novel in question. Generationality and the desire to be ‘at home’ suffuses the formation and development of the characters through a muted but obvious tension. Like in the case of Gogol in TN, whose discovery of his ‘home’, in spite of his understanding it as being where he is, ends in a digging up, using an archaeological analogy, of the past when he discovers the book of stories by Nikolai Gogol, the man who gave him his name, gifted to him by his father when he turned fourteen. Locationality and its obvious, and not so obvious, contradictions line this difficult mnemonic space and its narrative reconstruction. The characters
in her fictions, the spaces they occupy, and the spaces they do not want
to occupy, together constitute a triadic relationship of need and desire,
the need to not be what others want one to be, and the desire to be
something more than what one is fast headed towards becoming, with the
constant policing of one’s living by new spaces and their communitarian
nature, and the urgency that besets the displaced individual in a multi-
ethnic cultural space to discover and to understand their own ethnic
status and identity.