Chapter Three
Re-defining Female Identity

“A woman is a thing apart
She is bracketed off, a
Comma, Semi-colon, at most
A lower-case letter, lost”

-Rukmini Nair, “Margins, Mainstream”

The position of women as productive social beings has always been a central concern in Feminist Discourse. In the West, the ‘Civil Rights’ and the ‘Suffragette Movements’ have attempted to remove various political and social barriers to women’s full participation in society. The question of gender equality and equal social participation has been on the political agenda ever since Indian Independence. In the lower socio-economic strata, the question on women power has been a continuous quest in the Indian Postcolonial theorization. The Feminist Discourse provides opportunities to women to speak of their desires as individuals.

The English adjective ‘gynocentric’ popularised by Elaine Showalter in “Feminist Criticism in the Wilderness”, is often used in women writing to situate the experiences of women. ‘Gynocentric’ means specific to women, their related issues, and concerns. The morphological composition of “gynocentric” (‘Gynocentric,’ def. 2.) has the root word “centre” (‘Centre’, Def.3) that applies to ‘a person or a thing’ and the prefix “gyn” (‘Gyn’, def. 1) is ‘concerning a woman’. It signifies ‘gynocentric’ focus is on women. Thus, the study examines the struggles of Indian women in defining their identity.

Showalter calls gynocentric “a specialized discourse” that offers to study “women’s writing” (“Feminist Criticism in the Wilderness” 330). It is a topic related to women; their position, their role, their identity, their experiences, their attitudes, and their potentials. The Chapter focuses on how the women-centred short stories of
Devi and Lahiri examine diverse aspects of Indian women that define their self in the Postcolonial Native and Diasporic contexts. After defining the word ‘identity’ in the feminist understanding, there is an interrogation on the psychoanalytical purview of Sigmund Freud on his ‘repressive theory’ on women, to examine, to discover various challenges of Indian women in asserting their identity.

Culturally, a woman, as a social construct, is an addition or an extension of man. Judith Butler’s *Gender Trouble* describes it as “the pervasive cultural condition in which women’s lives were either misrepresented or not represented at all” (2). It indicates that in any cultural context, the identity of a woman not only defines her subject position but also distorts it. In the verse cited above, Rukmini Nair explains that the gendered status of a woman in Indian society is as ‘a thing’, ‘bracketed off’, ‘comma’, ‘semi-colon’, or ‘a lower-case letter’. The social role of a woman is deemed insignificant, considered cheap, considerably marginalised, constantly repressed, and consistently relegated to a second category in gendered identity. The previous Chapter studied how in Indian society, the role of women is repressive and dominantly Patriarchal in nature which is re-defined by women. In the caste system, if an upper caste woman is considered inferior, the lower caste woman is even lower than their upper caste counterparts in the social scheme that is dominantly caste and gendered specific in rural communities. The study evaluates that the subaltern women retell their history and assert their personal freedom by subverting their dominant and exploitative forces.

The literary tradition of women writing took time to define the individuality of women and to portray their struggles. To illustrate this point, the study discusses two Essays: “Feminist Criticism in the Wilderness” by Elaine Showalter and “Black Feminist Thought in the Matrix of Domination” by Patricia Hill Collins. Both
construct the contesting notions of the experiences, challenges, difficulties, and struggle of women to express themselves within and across their diverse cultural boundaries. Despite the differences in their contexts the idea about woman-related themes in women writing discussed in their Essays, is to examine the experiences of women and to evaluate their problems in defining their distinctiveness. Showalter states “All, however, have become gynocentric. All are struggling to find a terminology that can rescue the feminine from its stereotypical associations with inferiority” (“Feminist Criticism in the Wilderness” 331). She posits that there is a greater need to re-construct the image of women in Patriarchal domain. It is possible as Collins states, because “placing women’s experiences at the centre of analysis offers fresh insights on the prevailing concepts, paradigms, and epistemologies of this worldview” (553). It shows that only by situating the experience of women, can it unfold all their other oppressive forces and ideologies. Taking their views, the study observes that only women’s experiences can portray the struggles of women and only women can define their ‘self’. To understand the struggles of Indian women for their identity, it is important to define their identity by recording their personal stories.

The concept of ‘Identity’ is a complex phenomenon and every social being aspires for it. Dennis H. Wrong in “Identity: Problem and Catchword”, defines identity as “a value-charged, almost a charismatic term, with its secure achievement regarded as equivalent to personal salvation” (77). It signifies identity is a quest for spiritual attainment. It is the highest form of discovery of self. Erick Erikson in Identity: Youth and Crisis summarises ‘Identity’ as challenges of persons in defining their self in a growing environment. He states “Identity is a configuration arising out of ‘Constitutional Givens’ idiosyncratic libidinal needs, favoured capacities, significant identification, effective defenses, successful sublimations and consistent
roles” (qtd. in Kroger, 7). It points out that a person’s distinctive emotional needs help to explore one’s potential by recognising the activities and roles one has to play in a given environment. *The Chambers 21st Century Dictionary* relates the term with the synonyms: “Self-image”, “Self-Esteem” and “Individuality” (*Identity*, Def. 4). Identity is one’s own image in connection with one’s social surroundings.

The definition on identity aids to understand the need for the identity of Indian women and to see how they define it in their socio-cultural milieu. Identity is defined as a self-awareness that helps to explore one’s potential. It is a realisation of self, a quest for happiness, and finds personal fulfilment. In identity, one finds self in the fullness of its capacity having satisfied all its needs and plays a consistent role in society. It is a persistent struggle to discover one’s self against the ordeals of life. It is to seek a space to retain one’s individuality and dignity. Elaine Showalter in “Literature of Their Own” calls it as “self-awareness” and “self-expression” (14). Identity is inner dynamics that is coercive in an individual to assert one’s freedom. Identity leads to a life of autonomy and social mobility. Identity is a conscious or unconscious sense of individual freedom. Identity is an integrating power that binds closer various aspects of a person, unites individuals in communities, and creates harmony between the people of diverse culture. Unfortunately, in the Indian social system gendered identity has created divisions in social relations. Judith Butler states that it becomes impossible to separate “gender from the political and cultural intersections in which it is invariably produced and maintained” (4-5). She points out that women’s identity represents the intersection of political and cultural forces of Patriarchy in their constitution. The study locates many intersecting powers that have distorted the identity of Indian Native and Diasporic women.
Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak extensively discusses the issue of gendered-based ambivalent identity in, “Can the Subaltern Speak?” She opines that in the burden of patriarchy, women were not permitted to “speak” or “express” their views from the colonial and patriarchal period. The views of Spivak can be assessed Indian women were denied “speaking” (276) against the norms of Patriarchy and were silenced to reveal their self. For Spivak identity is a “nostalgic investigation of the lost roots” (276). Considering this, the Chapter makes a deep study on how Indian women search for their identity in their diverse locations.

John D. DeLamater and Daniel J. Myers in *Textbook of Social Psychology* contribute a similar idea in, “role identity.” (57) According to them “role identity” is a coercive function inflicted on every individual by a society. In the social relations, the ‘role-identity’ defined and distorted the potentials of individuals. It is taken to show Indian women were forced to define themselves within their cultural identity that led them into a dilemma causing gender differences. The identity crisis in ‘role-identity’ portrayed by the women writers in the Postcolonial Native and Diasporic experience point out various forces that have marginalised the Indian women.

From ancient times, the identity of Indian women was marginalised by the social practices imposed by societal institutions and religious dogmas. Indian women writers question distorted images of women generated by Freud and Lacan’s theoretical generalisation of “women as the ‘Other’, as ‘lack’ as part of ‘nature’” (Barry, 128). The writers challenge gendered constructed identities in ideologies. Their attempt is what Kumkum Sangari and Sudesh Vaid call in *Recasting Women* a “feminist historiography” (2). It indicates that women writers record the history of Indian women by re-writing their past. Their aim is to create social integrity, “the integrated domain of cultural history” (2) in terms of gender equality and
participation. They also study caste, class, and gender parity as exploitative agency in Indian society and obstacles on the discovery of the identity of women. In her Essay “Cartographies of Struggle”, Chandra Talpade Mohanty calls these agency the ‘institutional power structures which define and circumscribe the lives of women’. It denotes that the image of Indian women is distorted by the biased traditional practices.

The short stories of Devi and Lahiri, examine the subaltern identity of women to see how they re-define it. Their women possess endurance and a positive outlook in forging their lives in the restricted space. Despite their challenges, the women have explored their authentic identity through a growing sensibility and awareness. It speaks about their competence and inner strength to surmount their many obstacles. From the feudal and capitalistic contexts, Devi and Lahiri have looked into the ways in which these women define their self. The representations in their stories portray re-writing of subaltern identities of the mentally oppressed, the sexually abused, and the culturally alienated women. These subaltern women are the ones whom Devi focuses on her interview “The Author in Conversation”, stating “the suffering spectators of India that is travelling toward the twenty-first century” (xi). In her stories on subaltern identity, Devi depicts battered women who are in search of their self. Therefore, Devi’s ‘feminist historiography’ is to evaluate the gendered difference in rural tribal communities that has contributed to the unequal division of labour. A reading examines her literary contribution in which she has questioned the oppressive histories and presuppositions of Indian social system.

E.V Ramakrishnan in his “Introduction: Fictionalising India” to *Indian Short Stories* states, “Indian languages represent a wide spectrum of views, values, voices and visions” (xiii). Devi’s short stories have also recorded the boldness and authentic
voices of women that reveal their quest for identity. The precision and vitality of her stories discover the invisible identity of Indian tribal poor and the lowcaste women. It signifies that Devi re-writes tribal and the lower caste history of women by deconstructing their experiences in the feudal set up. It has helped readers to understand their struggles in building up of their families and societies. The identity of women is captured through the finer nuances of the local variety of Bangla or Bengali words used in her short stories. Sarmistha Dutta Gupta, one of her translators has retained the local register like mundas, dushads, ganjus, dhobis for the lower castes, misrals, mahajans for the upper castes; expressions like mela for village fair, gur formolasses, and khaini for chewing tobacco to add a local effect to the stories to understand the experiences of women. A word, mela has connotative appeal creating a visual effect to see how the women discover themselves in the local village fairs. It is the effect of Devi’s stories which give life to the characters through the regional register. Devi records the experiences of the women to capture their actual identity in the language of the landless labourer, the peasant, and the lower caste to locate the ‘intersecting powers’ exploiting them. M. Umar in the article “Mahasweta Devi’s Victim Consciousness: A Perspective” states:

As a writer with a social cause, Mahasweta Devi expresses and exposes the injustice, agony, pain and victimisation the meek undergo in the hands of the privileged and the mighty, She brings to light the areas of people's sufferings, which are unnoticed and ignored. She draws sympathy for the victims and wages a relentless war against the oppression. She raises sympathy in the people for the victims who suffer incessantly and awakens in them a consciousness of repulsion. (119)

It signifies how Devi has strived to empower the ‘unnoticed’ and the ‘ignored’ women of tribal communities by recording their experiences. Their identity in the
given cultural context spoken through the archetypal women characters reveals that she is the true defender of the rural tribal and the lower caste poverty-stricken women. An awakening of subaltern-consciousness through the voices of tribal women is reflected in their personal experiences which she delineates through her indigenous land with its complex diversified culture.

Sumanta Banerjee in her “Translator’s Introduction” to *Bait: Four Stories of Mahasweta Devi* speaks about Devi stating, “her tribal characters speak the fire of the anguish and anger that her heroines breathe” (2) to re-define their identity. It signifies their intensity to define their self through different sensibilities. Devi looks beyond the life of the marginalised women who strive to maintain their dignity despite the unpleasant experiences. Susie Tharu and K. Lalita point out that Devi attempts to ‘document these conflicts and understand their implications and acknowledge the involvement of women in the struggles’. Her uniqueness in recording the subaltern identity can be taken to state that she is a distinctive Indian regional woman writer. Undoubtedly, her short stories are Postcolonial parables that express subaltern desire for identity.

Devi’s re-writing of the identity of the tribal, the lower caste, and the sexually victimised woman, Dopdi is exclusively portrayed in “Draupadi”. It is asserted by Ridhima in her article, “Colloquium on Draupadi” stating, “Devi is concerned with the issues of women’s identity in a male oppressive society” (245). The Patriarchy has determined the ‘role identity’ of Dopdi. The male-determined roles of Dopdi are multiple: “DOPDI MEJHEN, aged 27”, “tribal called Dopdi”, “Draupadi Mejhen”, “Most notorious female” and “Long wanted”, “Santhal underground couple”, and “black-skinned couple” (Devi, “Draupadi” 19-21). Dopdi’s introspective voice in the story reveals the tribal insurgency caused by caste exploitation by Surja Sahu who
suppresses the lower caste identity for basic rights for water during the droughts in Bakuli, causing unemployment; driving the tribals to the Jharkhani forest for underground activities and causing mass rape of the tribal women. The story portrays subaltern-consciousness of the lower caste and rural tribal women in the retrospective voice of Dopdi. The injustice, exploitation, suppression, and denial of basic rights of the tribal caused by the ‘mainstream’ are recollected by Dopdi to invent different methods to assert her identity. Her personal memories are a cry of the rural and tribal poor for human dignity and empowerment. Thus, Dopdi wants to do away with her caste determined and gendered subaltern identity; constantly interrogates to counter unjust systems of the upper caste/ class gentry. Spivak in “Draupadi: Translator’s Forward” to Breast Stories views the gendered identity of Dopdi in the following:

She is introduced to the readers between two uniforms and between two versions of her name. Dopdi and Draupadi. It is either that as a tribal she cannot pronounce her own Sanskrit name Draupadi, or the tribalised form. Dopdi, is the proper name of the ancient Draupadi. She is on a list of wanted persons, yet her name is not on the list of appropriate names for tribal women. (10)

Arguably, it portrays Dopdi is denied of her identity due to her tribal and dalit background. Thus, she is an object of ‘double-marginalisation’ in the feudal system. Devi discloses Dopdi’s identity by exposing binary opposition which is between the ‘intellectual and rural struggles’, to use a phrase of Spivak. It is the power politics of Surja Sahu, Arjun Singh, Mr. Senanayak, the elderly Bengali “specialist in combat and extreme-Left politics”, “police station of Bankrajharh”, (upper caste mainstream) against the Santhal extremists group of ‘Dopdi and her husband, Dulan’. It is against the hypocrisy of these above said forces that Dopdi re-asserts her individuality.
Devi narrates how Dopdi uses her body as a survival weapon to attack her oppressors and define her identity as a competent tribal woman. It signifies that the marginalised, the oppressed, and the silenced voice of the tribal woman can stand against the intersecting patriarchal powers of the police force represented by Mr. Senanayak. As an interpreter of subaltern struggles, Devi’s uniqueness in “Draupadi” can be seen how she re-makes the Indian epic to portray identity of the tribal women. The classical Draupadi is re-made into Dopdi to express the subaltern need for self-expression and to re-discover their subjectivity in the imperialistic attitude of the ‘police forces of Bankrahjarh’.

The story can be evaluated to see how Indian women have suffered long due to caste distinctions, class prejudices, and gender exploitation. The story has acknowledged the struggles of the Santhal tribal and the lower caste women for their identity. Devi traces the root cause of women’s struggle for self to Indian myths and epics. Myth is viewed by Adrienne Rich in her Essay “When We Dead Awaken” as “Re-vision- the act of looking back, of seeing with fresh eyes, of entering an old text from a new critical direction- is for women more than a chapter in cultural history, it is an act of survival” (1). Applying her thoughts, it can be evaluated that through subaltern myths and epics, Devi has recorded the ‘cultural history’ of the Santhal women for an ‘act of survival’. It is this “self-knowledge” which Rich avers as “more than a search for identity: it is part of her refusal of the self-destructiveness of male-dominated society” (1). Devi has used the myth of Draupadi to locate the identity of Indian tribal women.

The story is Dopdi’s reflexive narration of her struggle for identity which she reiterates as a “veteran fighter” (Devi, “Draupadi” 32). In her encounter with her own caste men “Shomai and Budhna”, she feels that there is no shame as a Santhal, in their
treachery because her “blood is the pure unadulterated black blood Champabhumi” (32). ‘Champabhumi’ in tribal religious understanding is Earth Goddess who has the power to demand for human blood in order to ensure her fertility. Dopdi’s vengeance is against the culpability of her oppressors and she stands for a magnanimous mother earth that surpasses nature’s odds to prove her authenticity. She identifies it by recalling her forefathers who protected the tribal women by safeguarding their honour. As she walks towards the Jharkhani forest, Dopdi silently counters her oppressors saying, “How many times can I run away? What will they do if they catch me? They will kounter me. Let them” (28). Nevertheless, she challenges and transcends the traditional sexual morality that regards a woman’s chastity a virtue. Dopdi defies it in a bold move by refusing to clothe her naked-bleeding body after the gang rape in the police custody. The act of defiance is reflected in the story when she voices out injustice by refusing to cover her naked body. It can be noted how Dopdi, even though “her breasts are bitten raw, the nipples torn” (35), yet she subverts her oppressors by revealing herself as a potential tribal woman by making her proud appearance in front of them in the morning. Spivak supports it when she avers in her “Introduction” to Breast Stories, that in “Draupadi” what is represented is an erotic body of a woman is transformed into an “object of torture and revenge where the line between (hetro) sexuality and gender-violence begins to waver” (vii). Dopdi rejects culturally enforced feminine purity and gendered identity by celebrating her new found identity.

Dopdi’s defiance in repudiating culturally enforced feminine modesty shows her attempt to rise above the cultural structures of her times by relying on her inner strength. “Slowly the bloodied nailheads shift from her brain, Trying to move, she feels her arms and legs still tied to four posts” (Devi, “Draupadi” 35). A survival
instinct in Dopdi with her blood-stained body provides her with a freedom of speech and self-assertion to define her subjectivity not only for herself but for her Santhal community. In an unimaginable gesture of defiance, Dopdi witnesses on the following morning when she chooses white-clothed Senanayak, the rapist leader of the upper caste and the police representative, to spit her blood stains on him and counter his superior caste and middle class standards. She asserts, “The object of your search, Dopdi Mejhen. You asked them to make me up, don’t you want to see how they made me?” (37). Dopdi is not shattered. Rather she gathers her unwavering confidence and fearlessly retorts that she is not afraid of inhuman torture, violence, and rape. She outwits and baffles the army officers by revealing her inner core as a woman who can surpass their (oppressors) ideologies.

The defiance to the ‘role-identity’ (imposed identity) of Dopdi is depicted powerfully as she pushes Senanayak with her two bruised breasts. It is supported from the story in the following:

Draupadi’s black body comes even closer. Draupadi shakes with an indomitable laughter that Senanayak simply cannot understand. Her ravaged lips bleed as she begins laughing. Draupadi wipes the blood on her palm and says in a voice that is as terrifying, sky splitting and sharp as her ululation. What’s the use of clothes? You can strip me, but how can you clothe me again? Are you a man? (37)

The narrator comments that for the first time Senanayak was afraid to stand before an ‘unarmed target, terribly afraid.’ This act is witnessed to the indomitable spirit of Dopdi who resists sexual abuse by countering her exploiters. Kiran Budkuley points out in, “Mahabharata Myths in Contemporary Writing” that Devi’s intention in “rewriting the myth is to question, challenge, substitute, negate, reverse and re-focus the existing ideologies” (16). Devi’s subaltern-epic, questions Indian Patriarchal
forces oppressing Native women. There is a marked difference between the epic-woman of Draupadi and Devi’s subaltern Dopdi. Spivak views it:

Draupadi is infinitely clothed and cannot be publicly stripped. It is one of Krishna’s miracles. Mahasweta’s story rewrites this episode. The men easily succeed in stripping Dopdi- in the narrative it is the culmination of her political punishment by the representatives of the law. She remains publicly naked at her own insistence. Rather than save her modesty through the implicit intervention of a benign and divine comrade, the story insists that this is the place where male leadership stops. ("Entering the Third World" 252)

Resistance to oppression and victimisation of women become the main theme in the story. Hence, subaltern identity expressed in “Draupadi” speaks for rural tribal women like Dopdi despite being victims of rape, violence, and physical torture, reinvent their self. The story also justifies the argument of K. S. Moorthi, ‘women of all ages, appearance and behavioural category and in all situations are raped’. Devi emphasesis a greater need, to look into the subaltern aspect of violence and exploitation. Thus, subaltern-consciousness in the story supports for tribal women and their various social and personal concerns.

In “Breast-Giver” Devi portrays how despite class and gendered subaltern identity, a Brahmin woman, Jashoda discovers her motherhood in the upper caste, Haldars’ family as a wet nurse. The motherhood of Jashoda was enforced by Patriarchy to sustain “countless beings” and she “was not an amateur mama like the daughters and wives of the master’s house” (Devi, Breast-Giver 38). Devi portrays how a woman from amarginalised position moves to the ‘center’ to define herself. Jashoda’s marginalised identity can be viewed as Kangalicharan’s wife and a mother of twenty children. Although she is an upper-caste Brahmin woman yet not liberated
from hunger and poverty. Devi shows how the Brahmical identity of Jashoda is victimised and denied as a woman belonging to the lower class community. On the contrary, Jashoda is astute and empowers herself by making use of her milk to breast-feed her masters’ children. In the words of Spivak in “Breast-Giver: For Author, Reader, Teacher, Subaltern, Historian”, Jashoda is “the agent of transition from domestic to civil, private to public, home to work, sex to class” (87). It signifies a subaltern woman who re-constructs self becoming an empowered individual by defying her class and gender identity within her community.

The story is read to examine how the Haldars distort the motherhood of Jashoda to favour their wives who gratify their sexual desires. Jashoda discovers her identity in a two-fold exploitation, that of her husband and the Haldars. Whenever Kangalicharan starts to give her a feel she retorts saying, “Take good care how you use them” (50). He is made to acknowledge that she is a ‘faithful wife’ and a ‘goddess’ who brings a good amount of ‘grains, oil, and vegetables’ from the Haldars. Hunger challenges her to accept the profession of breast feeding the strangers’ children and she uses this submissive role to nourish herself.

The theme of motherhood in Devi’s stories is to define subaltern identity. As in, In the Name of the Mother, Jashoda’s story revolves around the motherhood image, but the difference is in In the Name of the Mother, all the women belong to the lower caste communities but here, Jashoda is a Brahmin. It is to portray how women either from the upper caste or the lower caste, the rich or the poor are the victims of cultural exploitation and economic oppression. Jashoda’s victimisation illustrates how class and gender oppression can marginalise an abject Indian mother in the villages. It is supported by Radha Chakravarty’s “Introduction”: 
From Jashoda in ‘Breast Giver’ to the unnamed mother in ‘Jamunabati’s Mother’, her fiction offers an array of maternal figures, as well as diverse figurative constructions of the maternal idea. Taken together, these works demonstrate how the traditional deification of motherhood can often conceal a collective attempt to circumscribe women within socially prescribed roles while denying them the right to articulate their individual needs and desires. (vii)

The subaltern women are restricted to play certain roles and denied their rights. The traditional veneration of Jashoda, the foster mother of Krishna is re-written to see how Devi portrays Jashoda in the subaltern context to re-define a mother’s identity. The exploitation of Jashoda becomes what Spivak asserts a “continual source of the production of surpluses for the man who owns her, or by the man for the capitalist who owns his labour-power” (“Feminism and Critical Theory” 496). Yet Jashoda outwits the capitalist Haldars by strengthening her economic position.

Jashoda’s search for space begins when she is employed to breast-feed the innumerable children of the Haldars household after the road accident of her husband caused by them. Jashoda subverts it by tapping their economic benefits. She commands respects from all, everyone’s devotion to Jashoda becomes so strong that at weddings, baby-showers, naming-ceremonies, and sacred thread-ceremonies, the Haldars invite her and give her the position of chief ‘fruitful’ woman. From the surplus value (her milk), Jashoda gets her daily meals and clothes on feast days. Her monthly payment is considerably increased and her gendered division of labour is also reversed. Her husband is forced to cook ‘plantain curry’, ‘lentil soup’ and ‘pickled fish’ in order to give her rest. This is how the binary opposition is deconstructed between the productive labour of Kangalicharan and reproductive labour of Jashoda.
The socio-cultural, economic, and political identity of subaltern women can be viewed in the motherhood status of Jashoda. It shows that Jashoda, a poverty-stricken mother, competently faces challenges to keep her domestic life smooth and accepts the enforced economic role as a hired wet nurse without compromises. Her new portfolio demands her to be pregnant always. She sacrifices her own children’s interests for the maternal care of the Haldars’ children. It can be supported with Luce Irigaray’s observation, “Where desire is concerned, the role of maternal-feminine power is often nullified in the satisfying of individual and collective needs. Desire for her, her desire that is what is forbidden by the law of the father” (“Bodily Encounter” 433). Rural subalterns like Jashoda are the mothers bearing the brunt of social and economic oppression by sacrificing their own interests. Yet, she surpasses exploitative situations and becomes the ‘goddess of the Haldars’ household’ because her milk fetches her greater economic value.

Devi has drawn a rare portrayal of subaltern motherhood which speaks of the Native women. It depicts a capitalistic society where the women of lower class are victimised. The story portrays the subaltern-consciousness of Devi in the following:

I desire a transformation of the present social system… After thirty-one years of Independence, I find many people still groaning under hunger, landlessness, indebtedness and bonded labour. An anger, luminous, burning and passionate, against a direct system that has failed to liberate my people from these horrible constraints, is the only source of inspiration for all my writings. (Devi, “Five Plays” x)

Jashoda’s ability for survival is what Spivak refers to as the Marxists feminists’ terminology which depends on her strength to produce children and be in a position for constant lactation. Yet, she is a mere commodity in the hands of her crippled husband, Kangalicharan who makes use of her for his sexual gratification. He exploits
her body to fetch “price-value, exchange value and surplus-value” (Spivak, “Feminism and Critical Theory” 496) and exposes her to challenges. It points out that the subaltern struggle is perennial and persistent.

The subaltern struggle for identity continues till the end. Devi depicts a suffering mother with breast cancer to show how subalterns continue their battle till their death. Devi gives an identity to Jashoda as a manifestation of the divine. Devi’s final tribute to the sacrificial mother is in the following:

Jashoda Devi, *Hindu female*, lay in the hospital morgue in the usual way, went to the burning ghat in a van, and was burnt. She was cremated by an untouchable. Joshada was God manifest, others do and did whatever she thought. Jashoda’s death was also the death of God. When a mortal masquerades as God here below, she is forsaken by all and she must always die alone. (Devi, “Breast-Giver” 73-74)

In contemporary literature, motherhood is one of the most discussed topics to redefine the identity of subaltern mothers by Indian women short story writers including Devi. Neeru Tandon, a critic in her book *Feminism: A Paradigm Shift* points out that motherhood has a history, it has an ideology, and it is more fundamental than tribalism or nationalism. Tandon’s statement can be applied to evaluate the short story of Devi who envisages the nation’s strength in the rural empowerment of women. Discussion on motherhood in Devi’s story reveals her desire to record the exploitative history of the subaltern mothers. Devi questions the gender constructed prerogative identities of subaltern mothers that are in the interests of the upper caste and middle class *Haldar* men as an agency of socio-economic exploitation. The story creates a space for these women by representing their identity. Therefore, undoubtedly Devi is one of the well-known Indian women writers who potently records, the subaltern struggle for motherhood.
In “The Five Women”, the subaltern identity of the lower caste women of farmer, hunter, and slave class are represented in the Indian epic, *Mahabharatha* to evaluate the subaltern power. Lata Chaturvedi in her article “Mahasweta Devi’s Feminist Rewriting” opines that Devi makes everyone to perceive the war from the perspective of the subaltern, the marginalised, the dispossessed, and the lower caste women. Chaturvedi explains how the oppression of the lower caste women is perpetuated in terms of class and caste discrimination. The metaphorical illustration depicts despite hunger, poverty, and destitution created by caste exploitation, the lower caste women retain their identity and find personal fulfilment within the community by celebrating their fellowship. The women record their personal history and plan out their lives as they practice independent beliefs of the communities that celebrate their gender equality. The un-recognised voice of the lower caste women is portrayed in the story to illustrate that identity as an integrating power of these women unites them in their respective communities and creates harmony between diverse cultures of the upper and the lower caste women. Devi records the voice of the subaltern by revolving the story around five socially ostracised and the poverty-stricken women: Godhumi, Gomati, Yamuna, Vitasta, and Vipasha. The five women taken for analysis are the collective voice of the Subaltern-Consciousness. In a parabolic narration Devi challenges the ancient practice of oppression of women in the epic war by representing it in subaltern reality. Her argument is that discrimination of women is not the only issue in Postcolonial India. They were present from the very inception of the upper and the lower caste Indian communities.

Devi bases her narrative on myth, a simple narrative mode to expose the complexity of Indian society. Sreemati Mukherjee in her article “Myth as Historical Revisionism in *Draupadi* and *Stanadayini*” opines:
Myth provides us with structures for organising experience and for many postcolonial and post-slavery writers dislocated by history, myth often provides ways of negotiating the stresses of history. For many women writers of colour like Toni Morrison, Simone Scwharz Bart and Maxine Hong Kingston, myth provides ways of claiming the margins of their gendered and racial positionality with resonant force. Faced with the depredations of history, myth suggests tools for survival. (140)

Mukherjee shows how African women writers use myth to speak about the historical struggles of the marginalised to counter gender inequality and racial exploitation. It is applied here to examine how Devi as an Indian Native writer similarly portrays that caste-ridden women in India defy class divisions and gender discrimination by telling their own stories.

Devi exposes the ‘centre’ and the ‘Other’ experience between Rajvritta, the high caste and Janavritta or Padatiks, the lower castes to narrate about the marginalisation of women and the denial of freedom. Devi dismantles a series of binary oppositions: Kauravas/Pandavas, Rajvritta men/Padatiks men, Rajvritta women/Padatiks women as rich/poor, upper caste or class/lower caste or class, nobles/servants, masters/slaves to critique the politics of the Indian caste system. These divisions have marginalised the lower caste women who have become widows after the war that has killed their husbands, Rajvritta Janavritta, and Padaliks (the class hierarchy). The exploitation of the lower caste communities can be witnessed in the story to evaluate the miserable conditions of the lower caste women. Devi represents the five women as from the families of Padaliks and from various lower caste communities. They are killed every day while safeguarding the interest of the upper caste men.
As in, “Draupadi” and “Breast-Giver”, here too Devi makes use of Indian mythical characters: Kauravas and Pandavas to portray the upper caste social system between Janavritta and Padatiks, the proletariat and their household of five women who construct their social identity. The outrage of the five women is against the feudal system that defines ‘role identity’ for them to be submissive and silent. The entire narration is heard through the voice of five women who are drawn to the ‘centre’ by defying their cultural constructs. The story illustrates Gramsci’s theory on class struggle between the elite and the proletariat which she represents from the feminist Indian perspective to the exploitation of subaltern women.

The story, “The Five Women” begins with an episode in the aftermath of Kurukshetra, a war between the cousins, the Pandavas and the Kauravas. Devi documents Indian caste and class struggle of the lower caste men. The caste hierarchy is evident in the death of the higher caste men who are cremated with ceremonial rituals and the lower caste men are stacked on communal pyres where they are burnt for days with the stench of putrefying flesh all around. Devi’s epic on the lower caste men can be illustrated by what M. N. Srinivas states: “these landless labourers are always confined to the lowest castes and are found serving their richer caste fellows as labourers and servants” (23). It is seen that the lower caste men die as slaves to their masters. The reality is witnessed by the five women from a distance wailing to see the corpses of their husbands being burnt.

An expression of the subaltern mothers for their identity is seen after the cruel event of Dharmayudha. The women confidently deny that they are not from Rajavritta, the upper caste; neither the servants of the royal households. They prepare themselves to be assertive to their identity by accepting their status. This is to repudiate the traditional codes of caste and class politics that oppress them. Despite
the caste and class divisions, the women seek freedom to go to the upper caste household to question the existing disparities. They defy discrimination and chalk out their survival scheme to fight their oppressors. Thus, after a few days of bereavement they go back to their communities to sow, reap, harvest, and look after their posterity.

The five women accept their challenges with boldness. Despite the conflicting situation of death, loss, and hunger they re-assert their identity with courage. The death of their husbands creates a wasteland like situation with scorched rock hard by the funeral fires creating ‘waves of angry heat that looked like a hazy cremation’ ground. Kurujungal, a tribal subaltern territory has become a place for poverty, hunger, desolation, and homelessness, after which the five women are summoned by Madraja, the head servant to serve the young widow and Princess Uttara, the wife of Abhimanyu who has died in the war. The situation is similar for the upper caste women too, who have lost their husbands, creating a royal quarters full of young widows. The guru in the palace is busy instructing them on the rituals of widowhood. It is to critique the suppressed and silenced voice of royal women stunned with grief, silently ordered to do as they are told. Devi’s portrayal of Hindu rituals and religious practices is to expose the hypocrisy of the upper caste Hinduism that exploits women of all communities.

Devi’s aim in contrasting the ‘white clothed’ (the upper caste women) and ‘black clothed’ (the lower caste women) is to evaluate their lives in a caste-ridden society. The upper caste women are forced to widowhood by the ‘acharyas’ (Patriarchy). For the lower caste women there is no gender differentiation; their life is so different, their language is so different. They feel good being able to talk in their own tongues. When a new born is bathed in water and warmed by the earth, their men and women come together to sing and play music for the ceremony. There is no
gender division of labour as men and women work and guard their fields with spears and arrows. They represent harmony, love, and mutual co-existence, which Princess Uttara is not aware of. The world of royal women is different from that of their servant counterparts. The former are ignorant and their subjugation is inside the royalty. The latter have wisdom that sustains both human life and preserves nature.

The five women remark to the upper caste women that they ‘float like ghost and like shadowy existence in the silenced chambers’ without loud talk. Despite the death of their husbands, the five women chat, talk loudly, tell stories, laugh, and are free. They accept life with all its challenges, go to fields for harvest, and marry their brothers-in-law to continue their posterity. These women bring awareness and rejuvenation to the upper caste women to embrace life as it unfolds. They are simple, free, and liberal women. It reflects the subaltern-consciousness of the lower caste women who re-tell their authentic experiences.

Devi’s delineation on the status of the working class women is more liberating and progressive. Devi critically re-examines pre-historical and Patriarchal domination from a subaltern perspective by representing the voice of the lower caste women to record their history, as yet unheard. The five women defy Madraja’s complicity in distinction when she tells them that she is trained well in the household of Rajavritta. The women retort that they are neither the slaves for the royalty or the courtesans for the palace, nor the prostitutes for the soldiers. It shows even though the five women are from various sections of the lowest strata of society yet they defy the double-standards of the upper caste community. In these women, Devi portrays multiple Indian tribal women and their powerful histories. It depicts that the subalternity of women is common to all castes and only with united effort can it be eliminated.
The marginality of Uttara, a woman from the royal family is not any lesser than that of her slave-counter-parts. The difference between the two sets from different castes is that the five women are self-empowered to resist caste, class, and gender exploitations. They have already chalked out their plan towards freedom and self-assertion. Devi portrays them as most radical in defying caste and class hierarchies in a Patriarchal society. She is able to record the authentic experiences of the women of the lower caste community. Poverty, deprivation, violence, exploitation, and injustice caused by the caste hierarchy do not marginalise these women. Rather, they make them confident and courageous to counter opposition. The caste conflict does not devastate them and they refuse to serve as servants, live as servants, but only accept to be the companions of Uttara. It is how the farming class women re-define their identity and assert their individual freedom. This enables them to enter the quarters of royalty with the sole aim of emancipating the women of nobility. Devi’s depiction of subaltern-consciousness is to unite all women for mutual support and encouragement to fight their ordeals.

The five women not only empower themselves but strengthen the upper caste women like Uttara to realise their identity. Uttara is depicted as a grief-stricken young widow with a child in her womb after the death of her husband in the war. The joy of Uttara bearing a son is shattered as traditionally Princes of the royal families are reared by the wet nurse. In the royal woman, Devi depicts how women are exploited due to traditions, customs, practices, and beliefs. The five women defy these practices by bringing about a metamorphosis in Uttara, after which Uttara is no longer submissive and subservient. Rather she questions the orthodox religious dogmas like ‘rites, rituals, self denial, and penance’. In the end, the slave and noble women are united. Uttara is liberated by expressing her quest for identity and it is manifested in
her talks with the five women. Thus, identity as an integrated power creates harmony among them.

The important aspect of the expression of fellowship among the women is seen in their pastime; in the way they share riddles, puzzles, and folk songs. The first riddle told by Godhumi is a symbolic subaltern representation of human mind which has no legs, no eyes and no ears, but has freedom to move, hear and understand everything, and Uttara is unaware of its meaning. Devi depicts through riddles to sharpen the minds of women for freedom of expression. The riddle of the ‘oyster and pearl’ awakens another aspect of enslaved subaltern women for freedom. Through riddles, the five women bring wisdom to the women of royalty. It creates unity, fellowship, and a sense of solidarity among the women. It paves the way for equality and sisterhood. After recognising their identity, the royal women share their ‘priceless treasures’ with five women. For her creative riddles Madraja is given a diamond studded bracelet as a priceless reward.

The story “The Five Women” puts an end to the woes of a fretful widowhood. The women counter the Patriarchal codes that impose restrictions on the widows. After the liberation, the women of the farmer, the hunter, and the slave class interrogate social evils that prevailed in the upper caste society. It signifies that the royal women of Rajavritta were slaves of an unjust social system. Mercy Lucas opines that the chambers of silence for the widows are all constructions of patriarchy with the embellishment of virtuosity. In this regard, the ‘black clad five women’ are on par with the ‘white clad royalty’. The Janavritta women defy social divisions by questioning the mainstream standards and the upper caste ideologies. They also record their own history and plan out for a happier life as they practice liberal beliefs and
gender equality. Devi’s intension here is not to denigrate the women of royalty but rehabilitate them for a fuller life.

The five women are justified when they decide to break the traditional barriers of leaving the Princess without her consent. It is here that the lower caste women take courageous steps to break free from hierarchies of servitude. Devi uses these women to do away with Patriarchal conditioning of subaltern women. The five women carve their identity by surpassing higher caste traditional codes of slavery and widowhood. Godhumi states that they have to get married. The five widows celebrate their identity by getting married to their own brothers-in-law. Kancha Ilaiah also supports the idea of a man-woman relationship based on gender equality that exists among the lower caste communities by stating:

Man-woman relations among Dalit Bahujans do not go beyond natural relationships. For those who have not come in touch with letters, for those whose spiritual wisdom is primitive but not natural because it has not acquired the character of manipulation and exploitation, the human touch is still retained. Here sexual intercourse is an organic need of the body but not for pleasure of the heart. (88)

It indicates that only men and women can bring about transformation by gaining a deeper understanding of their gender equality as co-equal partners.

The five women interrogate the discrepancies in gendered labour-division that has underestimated the powers of women. The caste system has distorted marriage, family, and other social institutions, and has inflicted injustice on women like the widows of Kauravas, Pandavas, and Padatiks. The voice of the women question the illegal law of Dharma, where “brother kills brother, uncle kills nephew, shishaya kills guru” (Devi, “The Five Women” 23). These women return to their communities with
renewed hope. They walk out confidently using their voice as a weapon to reclaim their identity as they alert Uttara, that they would come back to see her son to sing songs of joy and prosperity. Bindu Nair in her article, “Subversion and Resistance: The uses of Myth in Mahasweta Devi”, supports this bond of unity in Devi’s women stating “in her narratives, she makes them dynamic sites of the engagements between India’s tribal populations and the mainstream” (112). The sites are dynamic because the mainstream gets to learn from the tribal population and not vice versa as is usually accepted. It depicts that the presentation of caste-distinctions is to create community of harmony and peaceful co-existence among different communities. This is possible when an individual is free to express her views and accept her uniqueness. The subaltern struggle for identity is further elaborated in “Dhouli”. The protagonist, Dhouli is not a victim of her community but courageously discovers her inner call for freedom. In her “Translator’s Note” to Outcast: Four Stories, Sarasmita Gupta recognises these tribals as women who are not just victims, each subtly forcing their community to rethink societal norms. Dhouli is one of them who subverts her exploitative forces and asserts her individuality. The story is not only the sad plight of an ostracised woman who is treated as sub-human but protests at the inhumanity meted to her. A sub-human condition of the girl in “Dhouli” shows how women of backward communities in India continue to struggle to search for their identity despite exploitation and marginalisation. The grim realities depicted in the story, narrate about the unjust Indian social system that perpetuates exploitation of Native women. In spite of rape, flesh trade, poverty, and alienation, the tribal women continue to search for the inner dynamism of the spirit.

The nuanced and intricate story “Dhouli” like “Draupadi” is woven around a lower caste tribal girl, a victim of sexual violence and rape. Devi portrays the pathos
of the tribal women through the conversation between Dhouli and her mother by recording their painful past stories. An examination of Dhouli reveals that she has a number of social roles as “A dusad’s daughter, An untouchable, An unfortunate woman. A widow. She has no father or mother, neither a house nor land” (Devi, “Dhouli” 6). The social taboos of ‘dusads’ and ‘Brahman family’ are coercive and responsible in curbing Dhouli’s life. Her social marginality begins, when she is made to accept ‘role identity’ as widow at an early age. She is denied of her freedom even to look at herself in the mirror, neither allowed to wear shellac bangles, or a dot of sindoor on her forehead nor anklets of cheap metal. From this insignificant and curtailed position, she asserts her freedom and defines her identity. She is the Native woman who subverts Brahminical codes on forbidden love by falling for an upper caste Brahmín, Misrilal. Dhouli’s quest for identity begins as a young and attractive widow, falling prey to Misrilal’s greed and lust. Her cultural role as a widow victimises her sexually and leads her to a life of poverty. She is cheated when Misrilal marries another woman of his community. It causes Dhouli a life of humiliation, ostracism, and starvation. Despite the identity struggle, she is not a passive woman. Rather, she continuously discovers her inner self with courage by facing caste, class, and gender challenges.

Subalerns like Dhouli face challenges for identity, is examined in the use of the first letter of the title of the story which is in lower cased alphabet, ‘dhouli’. It denotes how the subaltern efforts for social mobility and autonomy are continuously denied and ignored. It is further explained with a brief description on the poor availability of buses in Taharr village, where the buses are over-crowded with adivasis on the local market days: Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays; poor road conditions, shabby transport service to different places from Calcutta to Ranchi; a
humble Parasnath’s tea stall-cum-grocery shop, and no availability of buses during rainy season. The scanty facilities of the Indian village like Taharr portray that subalterns are completely cut off from the mainstream. Devi describes the marginality of these Native women and the denial of their upward mobility in the detailed description.

Devi narrates rural tribal experiences to record the meager facilities given to them. Dhouli stands as the collective-consciousness for hundreds of rural tribal women and their struggle in coping with their daily drudgery in rural India together with village taboos. Dhouli is denied of human rights and is forced to live in poverty, hunger, prostitution, and bonded labour system. She stands for the rural women who are deceived, ostracised, and sexually exploited due to socially constructed identities. A statement of Toril Moi asserting Kate Millet could be useful here that under patriarchy the woman did not herself develop the symbols by which she is described. As both the primitive and the civilised worlds are male worlds, the ideas which shaped culture in regard to the women were also of male design. Similarly, Devi portrays age-old conceptual notions of the misrilals and the mahajans about the lower castes women of Dushas, ganjus and dhobis as untouchables have been perpetuated to exploit them to work in their household: cattle-grazing and other forms of ‘back-breaking labour’. The worst form of exploitation is satisfying sexual desire of mainstream men. Survival and resistance is a constant struggle that drives Dhouli to an outcast and a whore. Yet, Dhouli shows indomitable courage to resist, but poverty and hunger had driven her to be the ‘common property of every man’ to gratify sexual greed. It speaks of caste, class, and gender agency enslaving subaltern women. Devi interrogates inhuman acts of Brahmin communities, especially, the Misrilals by drawing on the binary difference between them.
The story delineates a range of injustices committed against Dhouli - a marginalised woman, a *dushad* (untouchable) a widow, and the orphan. Her forced pregnancy by Misrilal depicts how a tribal woman can be commodified for sheer lust by an upper caste man. Dhouli’s resistance for livelihood is her enforced prostitution. In flesh-trade, she is de-humanised yet her space for survival is instant. It is seen in Dhouli when she takes care of her son and her elderly mother. In her adversity as a lonely woman, she is not helpless or passive but makes persistent effort to subvert her exploiters. Devi’s unconventional treatment of her woman protagonist is to undermine an established system of the *mahajans* and the *misrilals*.

The idiosyncratic and ambiguous identity of Dhouli as a sex-worker is socially imposed and speaks for tribal women who are still searching for their self. The despicable predicament of rural India, Devi perceives, is a caste-ridden society that denies freedom for women. Through Dhouli’s ostracism, the writer aims at awakening the lives of many women who are forced into prostitution. H. Kalpana in her article “Politicising the Body: Re-Reading Mahasweta Devi”, supports this aspect of Devi that “her writings are necessary to depict and reveal the Other. She has no pretentious of who they are” (155). The unconventional story of a prostitute is to examine how Postcolonialism needs to liberate and empower rural women. Devi alerts the women to be aware of the gendered challenges and safeguard themselves from the false-promises of their counterparts. Thus, the story ends with the unjustified act of the exploiter, Misrilal who is scot-free and is sent away to another place while driving Dhouli to a wretched life.

In her youthful life, Dhouli’s search for identity leads her towards undesirable love and she comes back with Misrilal’s son by subverting the traditional notion of a son born out of wedlock. She rejects abortion by challenging Misrilal to look after his
son despite her economic constraints. Dhouli re-asserts her identity by accepting her motherhood. Devi constructs a tribal image of a mother in Dhouli as confident who transcends Patriarchal norms. By dealing with themes like prostitution and unwed motherhood of lower caste women, Devi breaks gender barriers and caste biases. But society continues to traumatised the untouchable woman whose “door through which the lion entered is being visited by rats and swine” (Devi, “Dhouli” 30). The statement specifies how Devi openly condemns the culpabilities of men and shows that Dhouli’s ostracism is caste, class, and gender based.

The poverty-stricken Dhouli continues to search for her identity despite criminalisation and violence. Like Jashoda in “Breast-Giver”, she uses her body as a tool for survival. When she is inevitably led to prostitution, Misrilal and his men inflict harsh judgment on her stating:

‘Dhouli cannot practise prostitution in this village. She can go to some town, to Ranchi and do her whoring there. If not, her house will be set on fire and mother, daughter, child will be burnt to death. Such sinful activities cannot continue in the heart of this village. This village still has Brahmans living in it. Puja is still done in their homes everyday’ (31)

The inhuman judgment passed by the village men forces Dhouli to become a professional prostitute. Devi targets Misrilal as the cause for Dhouli’s cruelty. Like Senanayak in “Draupadi”, Misrilal’s ‘privileged position’ as a male, an upper caste Brahmin, and a man of a superior class can escape the Patriarchal norms of society. Dhouli raises these questions and confronts Misrilal saying, “You can get married, run a shop, see movies with your wife, and I have to kill myself? Why? Why? Why?” (31). The subaltern story poses a number of questions. It is how Devi makes use of her language to question the Patriarchal norms of society.
In “Shanichari” Devi introduces another unspoken tribal woman to narrate personal experiences of the subaltern. The story in multiple voices examines the identity quest of Shanichari despite caste discrepancies. The caste disparity and power politics can be supported by Debasish Chattopadhyay’s article “Frames of Marginalisation in Mahasweta Devi’s Outcast” that “the label of “Otherness” is conferred by the politics of power dynamics and the hegemony exercised and enjoyed by a privileged class” (1). The ‘Otherness’ of the tribals whom Devi describes in the story is by exposing caste, class, and gender exploitation by the paramilitary force, the landlords, and the money-lenders. The ‘privileged class’ includes the readers to whom Devi states, “of course, people like you don’t want to believe in any kind of true stories. You’ve got so used to make-believe tales that true stories don’t attract you any longer” (Devi, “Shanichari”45). As in the other short stories, Devi uses myth, tribal folk-songs, and tribal tradition to depict complex and varied exploitation of subaltern women. Despite the marginalised position, the Native tribals of India are constantly in search of their identity. It is revealed in a conversation between Shanichari and Hriralal, an iterant folk-singer on trains.

The story ironically enough begins with a traditional narration of grandmother’s stories on age-old mythical exploitation of men: sindoorwalla, carpenter, weaver, and goldsmith, and their lust for women. Against these perverse men, the subaltern women search for their identity. “Shanichari” is slightly different and unique in its narration with an historical event. It is in Adi Jati Raksha Morcha Movement Devi depicts ostracism of a scheduled caste tribe stating:

Writer chose her path long ago- that of writing such stories. Asking herself what to write about, she trudged mile after mile down innumerable roads which led to one destination. At the end she always stood face to face with battles, blood, sweat,
tears... The link between the Raksha Morcha meeting and Shanichari meeting Gohuman Bibi is both real and strong. (Devi, “Shanichari” 44)

In her inimitable narration, Devi enlightens the readers with Shanichari’s encounter with Gohuman Bibi, a woman flesh-trade agent. Shanichari’s story begins in an encounter with police who forcefully drive her and other women naked into the forest from the village, Rata to be sexually exploited. The Government officials: CRP (Central Reserve Police), BMP (Bihar Military Police), BSF (Boarder Security Force), and other paramilitary forces gang rape her in the forest. She is constantly tortured, humiliated, and starved. Like Dopdi, the story of Shanichari is similar and she finds her identity by fighting against her exploiters. As the “pangs of an empty stomach are hard to resist,” (40) she is forced to migrate to the brick kilns of Kolkata, where, she is again exploited by the mahajans and the dikus, the landlords and the moneylenders. Despite struggles, Shanichari’s search for self continuous.

Shanichari’s subaltern identity as a girl belongs to the Oraon tribal, the lower caste. The exploration of the victim position of Shanichari is to examine how women belong to different communities are exploited in the caste system. Prior to Shanichari, four girls were trapped for flesh trade and go missing from the same village. Shanichari and the other girls are also victims of flesh trade, bonded labour, ostracism, and poverty. Devi continues to speak of the sad and melancholic tales of inhumanity and ruthlessness meted out to the marginalised women. Patricia Hill Collins in Black Feminist Thought, connotatively states the gendered marginalised women are dehumanised objects, living machines and can be treated as part of the scenery. These ‘dehumanised objects’ are the ones whom, Devi states “have been exquisitely carved out of black stone” (“Shanichari” 46). It states that women are denied of their identity and treated as inanimate beings. Collins and Devi depict
similar subaltern aspect of women. Devi’s focus is how in Indian indigenous society, these women are exploited to work in unhealthy conditions at brick kilns without basic amenities. To escape physical torture, they take up brick kiln work in Kolkata, but, their sexual exploitation continues by their employers like Rahmat. These drudgeries of women are recorded by Devi stating:

The brick-kiln owners of West Bengal are mostly from north Bihar. This practise of recruitment of Adivasi labour must be quite old. Adivasi women, ex-concubines of the kiln owners, are sent to remote villages. These recruiting women are called sardars. They go to the village haats and lure young girls with tales of good jobs near the magic city of Calcutta. (*Dust on the Road* 47)

Shanichari’s experiences are similar: homelessness, poverty, and hunger lead her to a life of misery. In Kolkatta, when the brick kiln is closed, all the women, including Shanichari do not come back home easily as they are quite aware of the fact that “A monstrous city, Kolkatta. Devours everything around it...Turns some girls into whores sells off the rest.” (“Shanichari” 39) Devi writes of the wretched lives of tribal women in Kolkata, a ‘miniature India’ where exploitation of women continues unabated. It is to show subaltern women are victims of capitalistic society. Shanichari is ignorant of inhuman situation until she reaches the big city. It is here the women are forced to eat the ‘dirt from the pigsties of brick kiln owners’. Nearly for three hundred girls there is no route of escape but to accept inhuman conditions: bonded labour, imprisonment, and prostitution.

Devi depicts how religious festivals and fairs are occasions for subaltern exploitation for sex. During these days, the women are forced to drink liquor till they pass out and are repeatedly gang raped. The hypocrisy of the religious practice and its evil effect on the tribal women as victims of sex and inhuman treatment is subtly
portrayed. It explains that the identity of women in subaltern conditions is dehumanised by the landlords and the brick kiln owners. When the brick kiln is shut down, the women are forced to exist. Knowing the consequences of belonging to their community, Shanichari and her companions as outcasts make their way home. Shanichari with an illegitimate child in the womb goes in search of her identity. She is ostracised by her own community as a whore allegedly carrying a *diku’s* child. Here, Devi narrates how a woman can remain a subaltern within an oppressive community.

Despite a bleak future for a son born out of wedlock, Shanichari’s quest for identity continues. It culminates in making her own dwelling, a small room for her son; daily going out with him to collect some coal to sell and to fend for themselves. It is how Shanichari asserts her motherhood and finds her identity as a woman of her tribe. Devi decries Shanichari’s exploitation and emphasises the need for subaltern empowerment stating:

> I know Shanichari is showing us who the real culprits are. I also know that she’s waiting. But I do not know how long she’ll have to wait. Her story is not over. As long as people like Rahmat unabashedly run brick kilns, as long as Gohumans entice girls like Shanichari, till our motherland can provide basic food and clothing to girls like her, the freeze shot of Shanichari pointing her finger at the accused will remain.

(55)

In the open-ended story, Devi continues to question about the inhuman conditions of the subaltern in the tribal belt. The story expounds that as long as India is freed from social exploitation, there is no way out for Indian women. Shanichari’s life is the metaphor for Indian subaltern women who continue to search for their identity.
A reading of these stories shows that the tribal women document their conditions as the socially segregated, the economically poor, and the politically denied category. They voice out their traumatic experiences with their landlords and moneylenders. Despite a bleak future in a biased society, there is a constant search for their identity. Most of the stories narrated in the third-person-narration expose the roots of oppression in Patriarchal rural tribal India because the stories speak about the challenges of women in social prejudices. Devi depicts that after many years of independence, the identity of tribal women is unchanged and unquestioned in India. The upper caste or the middle class elite groups discussed in the stories: Senanayak, the Haldars, Rahmat, the Misrilal, and the Government officers continue to marginalise the tribal women. In the discriminatory social system, the women have defined their identity by recording their daily experiences.

Lahiri too makes a mark in Diasporic writing through her exploration on the self-discovery of Indian Diasporic women in America. The stories taken for study are all set in America except “Treatment of Bibi Haldar” and are about the Indian Bengali women’s search for identity in the Diasporic context which is in a state of constant flux. A quest for identity is evaluated in the ethnically alienated woman, Mrs. Sen in “Mrs. Sen’s”, culturally diverted Twinkle in “This Blessed House”, culturally tormented Bibi Haldar in “The Treatment of Bibi Haldar”, socially alienated Mrs. Mala in “The Third and Final Continent”, and nostalgic Ruma in “Unaccustomed Earth”.

A reading centred on these women aims at evaluating their subaltern position to see how they reconstruct their self by confronting the challenges in times of alienation, immigration, estrangement, subjugation, and cultural discrimination. These women struggle to seek a space of their own to retain their individuality and dignity in
the midst of social and cultural constraints. The women belong to the families that Homi Bhabha describes in *The Location and Culture* as “‘organic’ ethnic communities” (7). They indicate the struggle of a group belonging to a different tradition and culture, trying to find its identity in a different culture. From this viewpoint, it is seen how Lahiri writes about the constant struggle the Indian Bengali women face to discover their self in the ‘hybridised’ context of American culture. Lahiri goes beyond their sorrows to explore their positive experiences in which they reconstruct their self and discover inner happiness. The women express their desire for identity despite being victims of social, cultural, and ethnic distress caused by class, ethnicity, and gender related issues within their Diasporic families and communities. This shows how Lahiri is one of the most relevant Indian Diasporic women writers of modern times who speaks for the subaltern-consciousness.

The discovery of identity of women in Patriarchal and ethnic experiences of Indian women is seen in two stories: “Treatment of Bibi Haldar” and “Mrs. Sen’s”. The stories convey what Ania Loomba in her Essay “Feminism, Nationalism and Postcolonialism” states, “Feminism and postcolonialism as interdisciplinary subjects articulate the standpoint of the downtrodden” (193). Loomba posits the downtrodden are able to express their exploitative situations in order to find ways to confront them. Lahiri also discovers the world of women, marginalised by social customs in their subaltern experiences. “The Third and Final Continent” is about the experiences of social injustice, exploitation, and discrimination. Lahiri portrays her women, not as victims of Diasporic issues but as those who resist them in order to find meaning in life.

In “The Treatment of Bibi Haldar”, it is examined how despite gendered discrimination, the Native women define their self. Bibi Haldar, the young woman
protagonist, is portrayed as someone who “screams and throws in the night, falls unconscious into a shameless delirium” (Lahiri, *Interpreter of Maladies* 158-59), bemoaning her gendered identity which is shaped by the cultural customs of her orthodox family that suppress her voice by not understanding her individuality. Rupam Gogoi viewing Bibi’s illness, in “Subalterns in the Stories of Jhumpa Lahiri” universalises the gendered identity of Lahiri’s women: “Women like her are not an exception in any part of the world” (185). Gogoi opines that even though their voice is suppressed yet sometimes the voice seems to be heard louder than the rest. Bibi’s “delirium” questions the ill-treatment and negligence meted out to a girl by her family, an elder cousin, and his wife. Her search for identity in an oppressive Patriarchal environment is for twenty-nine years. Lahiri shows how Bibi’s mental ailment is caused by cultural distortions. Lahiri starts the story of a twelve year old, Bibi Haldar to record how in the Patriarchal society, a woman is marginalised from her childhood. Its ideologies as recorded in the story are ‘family, priests, palmists, spinsters, gem therapists, prophets, and fools’ who cause pain and suffering to the girl. Bibi’s ‘family members, the priests at the temples, palmists well-versed in astrology, spinsters, gem therapists, and prophets’ are symbolically created to show how the oppression of woman is caused by different social structures.

To discuss the gendered position of Bibi, she is considered as a sick, unmarried, orphan, and an over-protected girl without a future; is given a job of making an ‘inventory for the cosmetic shop’ of her cousin, Mr. Haldar. Bibi’s freedom is curtailed; she is not trusted either to cross a street or to board a bus without supervision. She is confined to the storage-room in the attic with an adjoining toilet, a curtained entrance, a window without a grille, and shelves made out of panels of old doors. The detailed description speaks about the way Bibi is isolated and ostracised.
Her struggle to discover her identity is a difficult task. Her marginalised identity is in her receiving no income but provided “meals, provisions and sufficient clothing at every holiday. At night she has no security and is forced to sleep on the “folding camp cot at her cousin’s place downstairs” (159). Bibi’s marginalised appearance is examined in the fact that she is shabby. She wears cracked plastic slippers and a knee-length housecoat without a hem. She looks grotesque with hairless shins, a thin upper lip, protruding gums, and small teeth. It portrays that a woman is denied of her basic rights as a person. The story explores how a woman who is denied her basic rights to dignity, education, expression, justice, and health, empowers herself by resisting the exploitative society.

After getting her treated from various sources, Bibi’s family feels that her mysterious sickness has no cure. Treatment offered by doctors makes her worse. Lahiri describes the native Indian practice of girding Bibi’s arms and neck with amulets to ward off the evil and adorning her fingers with auspicious stones. In the imposed religious beliefs are the binding of her wrists with ropes, stinging poultices pressing down upon her, wise men massaging her with eucalyptus balm into her temples, steaming her face with herbal infusions, and following the suggestions of ‘ignorant Christians’ to take her by train to ‘kiss the tomb of the saints and martyrs’. These practices distort the image of woman and are obstacles for a fuller life. Amidst these exploitations Bibi finds her selfhood. Finally, in the fullness of her ability, she tries to satisfy all her needs.

Bibi’s inner thirst for self does not accept the treatment offered by the doctors. Allopathy, Homeopathy, Ayurvedic, and other alternative medicine cannot cure her sickness. After many X-rays, therapies, auscultations, and injections Bibi has no healing. Advice for weight gain or loss does not bring about any change in her. One
forbade her to sleep beyond the morning hours; the other insisted that she should remain in bed until noon. If one told her to perform headstands, the other made her ‘chant Vedic verses at specified intervals’ throughout the night. She was asked to be taken to Calcutta for hypnosis. When all failed she was asked not to use ‘garlic’ and drink ‘bitter medicine’, ‘green coconut water’ and ‘swallow raw duck’s eggs beaten in milk’. The superstitious practices dampen Bibi’s spirit and she avenges in an absurd behaviour. She expresses her mental agony physically through convulsions and a loud voice as “if she were speaking to a deaf person” (160). Lahiri writes how Indian religious cults, superstitious beliefs, and cultural practices confine women to experience unbearable anguish. It is against this distorted identity, Bibi endeavours to define her selfhood.

Indian feminism examines various reasons for the mental disturbance in women. In Sexual/Textual Politics, Toril Moi on one hand, comments on madness in a woman, dealt in detail by Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, as a result of her being denied the right to express her authentic image and, on the other hand, expected to conform to the patriarchal image of ‘a passive virtuous woman’. In the cultural construct, if a woman went against this idealised image, she was called a ‘monster woman’. According to Gibert and Gubar the monster woman is the one who resists being submissive and acts on her own instincts. Moi asserts:

The monster woman for Gilbert and Gubar is *duplicitous*, precisely because she has something to tell: there is always the possibility that she may choose *not* to tell or to tell a different story. The duplicitous woman is the one whose consciousness is opaque to man, whose mind will not let self be penetrated by the phallic probing of masculine thought. (57)
The roles of women were socially constructed to be passive and silent. Women were not allowed to be assertive and express their freedom. Taking the views of Gilbert, Gubar, and Moi the assertive women like Bibi are not mad. Rather they have a personal story to narrate which they express from their own viewpoint by rejecting the male-controlled voice of women. Bibi has a unique voice and has her own story. Lahiri records her voice as her “moans echoed through the stairwell” (*Interpreter of Maladies* 161) and everyone witnesses her outbursts.

Lahiri’s perception on the distorted woman’s identity is similar to what Betty Friedan writes in her Essay, “The Problem That Has No Name”. Friedan avers that the challenges women faced to define their identity were enormous: “they were taught to pity the neurotic, unfeminine, unhappy women who wanted to be poets or physicists or presidents” (356). It indicates that the women who wanted to be socially and economically independent were considered ‘neurotic’, ‘unfeminine’ and ‘unhappy’. They were denied their freedom of expression. Supporting the statement, it is argued Lahiri’s delineation of Bibi’s madness is about her struggle to define her identity whereby she is considered sick. All she wants is to be a normal human being, “to be spoken for”, “protected”, “placed on her path of life”, “to serve suppers”, “scold servants”, and “to go to the Chinese beauty parlour and to marry.” (Lahiri, *Interpreter of Maladies* 160). She wanted to know the details about “weddings”, “jewels”, “invitations” and “the scent of tuberoses strung over the nuptial bed” (160). This explains Bibi was searching for her identity and for economic freedom. Lahiri describes Bibi’s aspirations for socio-cultural freedom in great detail.

As discussed in the second Chapter, Shoshana Felman states, “a woman’s madness or hysteria was originally conceived as an exclusively female complaint” (117). This indicates that women were forced to confine themselves to the restricted
social roles defined by Patriarchy and those who defied were isolated. Citing the three works, Phyllis Chesler’s “Women and Madness”, Luce Irigaray’s “Speculum of the Other” and Balzac’s short story, “Adieu”, Felman argues that a woman’s madness could be the outcome of her mental rejection of culturally imposed roles. Chesler, Irigaray, and Balzac are of the opinion that the image of women is male-constructed and stereotyped. Lahiri’s interpretation of Bibi’s madness is similarly a protest against a distorted identity. Bibi’s ‘female complaint’ is her silent cry for self expression in her madness.

The need for women’s identity is elaborated by Gilbert and Gubar in, *The Mad Woman in the Attic*. Their debate is against social institutions that condition women to “act in ways which would cause them to become ill” (54). It means that the identity of women is restricted and stereotyped. They examine how women who could not conform to the accepted cultural norms were considered sick and hysteric. The sickness of Bibi as diagnosed by Lahiri is due to her social confinement, ostracism, exploitation, and denial of rights. Lahiri exposes the unjust social conditioning of her woman as she posits the psychosomatic illness of Bibi as the result of the oppressive culture promoted by Patriarchy. The reason for Bibi’s illness is as Rajeshwar Mittapalli in the article, “Diasporic Indian Writers of Bengali Heritage” states “the cancerous presence of the infections prescriptions from patriarchy” (140). Therefore, Bibi’s illness is a ‘female complaint’ for self definition and a protest against social constructs.

The story supports Bibi’s resistance to express a psychological revolt against the biased beliefs of her family. It is expressed in an act of facing her challenges to define her identity as a normal human being. Rupam Gogoi acclaims the assertive nature of Bibi stating, “she dared to do what she thought best for her without paying
any heed to what the society might say” (186). The narrative with multiple voices of women portrays the collective women voices to uncover the results of the oppression of women. To refer to the voices of women created in the story as the ‘sympathetic neighbours of Bibi’ are the united voices of women as subaltern-consciousness to empower Bibi. Although, Bibi as a socially ostracised woman can neither sit down nor stand in the limited space of her room. It shows that Bibi is neither a lonely woman nor a passive woman. Rather a woman who is aware of her individuality and constantly awakens to assert it. Thus, Bibi’s story truly delineates a unique identity of subaltern woman. The women like Bibi are not mentally deranged but are victims of social assumptions.

Bibi’s cousin is a representation of Patriarchy and portrayed in his reply to the enquiry of his neighbours’ on Bibi’s health and her marriage. He does not want to waste his profits on a wedding, feeding guests, ordering bracelets, buying a bed, assembling a dowry for Bibi. He states:

We have little time for indecent suggestions. What won’t be cured must be endured.

Bibi has caused enough worry. Besides, who would marry her? The girl knows nothing about anything, speaks backward, is practically dirty, can’t light a coal stove, can’t boil rice, can’t tell the difference between fennel and cumin seed. (Lahiri, Interpreter of Maladies 163)

Bibi’s abilities and potentials are undermined by him. She is considered an impediment in running his business. His denigration clearly proves that Bibi is treated as an outcast, unwanted, and marginalised. Bibi’s ‘dementia’ is not about her illness but her quest for freedom and social recognition. At every stage, Bibi is subjected to humiliation despite her assertion that, “apart from my condition I am perfectly healthy” (167). Lahiri conveys socio-economic and cultural conditioning of the
marginalised women by placing Bibi in a gendered oppressive world. Lahiri makes a case for a woman’s space as being essential for every human being. Pradip Patra opines that Bibi in spite of her miseries has aspirations. Bibi’s longing helps her to accept her identity.

At the end of the story, it is seen that Bibi is about four months pregnant. The cause for her pregnancy is unknown as she does not reveal who was responsible and does not remember what had happened. One evening in September, she gives birth to an illegitimate son. Her womanhood is fulfilled and she has to take care of her son. Bibi takes a confident step and fulfils her maternal obligations despite her fractured identity by being a responsible mother and taking care of her son. The women in the neighbourhood teach her “how to feed him, bathe him and lull him” (172). Her assertion of identity can be noted in the way she whitewashes the storage-room, arranges “padlocks on window and doors”, dusts “the shelves”, arranges “the leftover potions and lotions”, sells Haldar’s old inventory at half price. She becomes a great support to the nieghbourhood women who purchase “soaps”, “kohl”, “combs”, “powers”, (172) and other things from her for their sustenance. The story ends with Bibi’s empowered status as a woman who goes out in a taxi to the wholesale market for her departmental-store. Bibi’s integrated life shows identity as an ennobling power which unites her and other women to create social harmony. Bibi sells her products to her neighbours and empowers them through her service.

In the next story, “Mrs. Sen’s”, an Indian Bengali Diasporic woman to America, Mrs. Sen has similar experiences to awaken the subaltern-consciousness by discovering her identity in the western culture. Lahiri portrays the authentic identity of a thirty year old Mrs. Sen in “an index card outside the supermarket as a ‘Professor’s wife’, responsible and kind” (111) to take care of any child as a baby-
sitter in her home. Her struggle for identity in a Diasporic context is viewed through
the eleven year American boy, Eliot. He observes the Indian ways of Mrs. Sen that he
counters with his mother’s American lifestyle. It depicts how the experiences of Mrs.
Sen in the West are culturally marginalised and therefore, traumatic. Tejindra Kaur
points out some of the challenges of Lahiri’s women as “engendered by the
experience of migrancy and diaspora such as displacement, rootlessness,
fragmentation, discrimination, marginalisation and crisis of identity in women” (39).
Mrs. Sen occupies a unique position among Lahiri’s women who despite her cultural
fragmentation discovers her ethnic identity in her ‘hybridity’. She is Indian in her
cooking, dressing, and appearance with a “sari, a different pattern each day, fluttered
below the hem of a checkered all-weather coat” (Lahiri, Interpreter of Maladies 119)
and vermillion in the parting of her head. Her longing for Indian identity is witnessed
in the use of Indian things: “a blade that curved like the prow of a Viking ship” (114),
keeping the slippers “on the shelves of a small bookcase by the front door” (112), and
recalling family gatherings to cut “vegetables through the night on the eve of a
wedding party in India” (116), cleaning chicken at her Diasporic home and “wearing
powder everyday like the wedding ring” (117). Her nostalgic longing for “home”
(116) is conveyed through her stories of her past in Calcutta as narrated to Eliot. She
avers:

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. By then Eliot
understood that when Mrs. Sen said home, she means India, not the apartment where
she sat chopping vegetables. (116)
Despite her Indian dress and manners, the boy finds Mrs. Sen more hospitable, friendly, acceptable, and understanding than his mother “who looked odd” (112) in many ways.

The Disaporic dislocation marginalises Mrs. Sen for she lacks a sense of belonging and feels embarrassed when she converses with Eliot’s mother. Mrs. Sen’s humiliation in her new existence is her inability to communicate in English and to drive a car in America. The cultural practices at home are different and she had a driver when she wanted to go out. The mention of the word ‘India’ seems to release something in her heart. Nostalgically Mrs. Sen feels that “Everything is there” (113) in India and the others could not understand what she implied. Driving becomes a major challenge in America without a “chauffeur” (113). Her identity in this existence is associated with the very fact that her dwelling is located on the fringes of an American university campus where she offers her services as a baby-sitter. The lobby is tiled with unattractive squares of tan with a row of mailboxes marked with masking tape or white labels. Inside the house there is intersecting darkness left by the vacuum cleaner placed on the carpet. Carpets in mismatched colours are placed in front of the sofa and chairs. The TV and the telephone are covered with pieces of yellow fabric with scalloped edges. Lahiri gives a detailed description of Mrs. Sen to portray the struggles of Indian women for identity.

Lahiri presents the quest for identity by Indian women as a constant struggle in different cultural contexts. According to Randolph B. Persaud in his article “Hegemonic Socialization of the Immigrant in America”, states, “Americanization is really the hegemonic socialisation of the immigrant into the major assumptions, myths, institutions, and ideological orientations of the United States” (71). On the
contrary, Mrs. Sen is unable to accept the hegemonic socialisation due to her ethnic identity and assimilation becomes a major problem for her.

Lahiri provides a vivid description of Mrs. Sen’s personality to portray the struggle of the Indian woman for identity. Mrs. Sen is described as a woman who despite the gap between her teeth and dull pockmarks on the chin has sparkling eyes. She looks a typical traditional Indian Lady with her shimmering white sari patterned with orange paisleys. This description shows how Lahiri as an Indian Diasporic writer records the challenges of traditional Indian women living abroad. Mrs. Sen’s daily experiences in American culture express a need for space and social respectability. Also she is beset with many challenges.

Mrs. Sen is extremely dejected and feels alienated from her country. Noelle Brada Williams in her article, “Reading Jhumpa Lahiri’s Interpreter of Maladies as a Short Story Cycle” states that, ‘A sense of exile and the potential for- and frequent denial of - human communication can be found in all of Lahiri’s short stories” (454). Mrs. Sen’s ethnic identity and longing for India marginalises her. When Eliot’s mother says, “you mean a chauffeur?” (Lahiri, Interpreter of Maladies 113). She is baffled and looks at her husband to understand the meaning of chauffeur as a driver. Mrs. Sen’s need for re-defining her identity comes through in her interest in American culture and in her desire to learn to drive and get her “licence by December” (113). The narrator delineates that she keeps recalling her traditional way of life in India. It is also revealed in a conversation between her husband, Mr. Sen, and Eliot’s mother, an American lady. The latter wants her son to be admitted to Mrs. Sen’s playschool but is snobbish about her American social and economic background.
In the characterisation of Mrs. Sen, Lahiri presents a wide ranging social and economic imbalance in Diasporic living that challenges Mrs. Sen to strengthen her economic position by starting a playschool in an American University Campus. Lahiri portrays her as an Indian woman having a good reputation as a person who cares for the little children. Yet, she is seen as a woman with no license to drive a car in America. This can be noted when Eliot’s mother takes down every detail of Mrs. Sen’s life recording it on steno pad. Mrs. Sen becomes an ethnic and class victim with Mrs. Eliot. Lahiri evaluates the gulf between the two women in the challenge Mrs. Sen has to cope with American culture. Tejinder Kaur in his article “Portrayal of Diaspora Experience in Jhumpa Lahiri’s Interpreter of Maladies”, records similar experiences:

This living ‘in-between’ condition is very painful and marginalizing for the diasporas... They also face cultural dilemma when cultural practices are mocked at and there is a threat to their cultural identity. They stand bewildered and confused and show resistance also to the discourse of power in various forms... their experiences of feeling rootless and displaced can also be of similar nature. (38)

Mrs. Sen experiences the ‘in-between’ condition when she encounters Eliot’s mother. Eliot observes that his mother refuses a biscuit each time Mrs. Sen extends the plate in her direction. Instead, she is curious about Mrs. Sen’s background as an Indian woman. Mrs. Sen dislikes the ‘white’ woman’s manners when she wants to know if there are other children in the Apartment, if Mrs. Sen had taken care of any children before and for how long she would live in America. Despite the strange inquisitive behavior of Mrs. Eliot, it is Mrs. Sen who cooks and serves dishes as a mark of her hospitality. Even though Mrs. Sen is humiliated, restless, and uneasy with the ‘white woman’ yet she is enduring and patient. Her subaltern experience locates her as a
separate person from the dominant culture of Mrs. Eliot. She takes care of her son by serving him meals, ‘stew with green beans and tinned sardines’, biscuits and other eatables. It shows how even after having a decent place to live and the status of being a Professor’s wife, Mrs. Sen is marginalised and discriminated against on the basis of class, ethnic, and gender identities.

The traditional practices of Indian women are dominant in their Diasporic living which help to realise their identity. It is examined in the way the boy looks into the life of Mrs. Sen and feels that she is not close to her husband. When he is given a camera to click their photograph, Eliot feels sad to see that they stand apart. The cultural barriers are also unfolded in the conversion between Mrs. Sen and Eliot. Lahiri portrays the identity of Indian women and their traditional taboos of married life in the conversation between the two. The impossibilities in a Diasporic culture of expressing her Indian identity challenges Mrs. Sen. The restrictions imposed on her in American culture are highly intolerable. She challenges western norms and continues to search for her identity by not conforming to its culture.

The Diasporic women of traditional and conventional Indian families like Mrs. Sen do not conform to American values. As T. Satayanarayana and Katyayani S. in their article, “Redefining Gender Roles: Jhumpa Lahiri’s Interpreter of Maladies” states, “These women consequently suffer from a conflict between the traditional past and modern present” (282). Mrs. Sen also suffers from similar conflicting situations between her past life at home and her present life in America. Yet, she copes with the new situation of ethnic discrimination. Mrs. Sen does not find difficult to forget her home and its culture. In all her stories, Lahiri situates her women in a conflicting situation where they get attached to the rich tradition and culture of the homeland. This is how Mrs. Sen forges her home identity, despite the Diasporic challenges.
The Indian identity of Mrs. Sen is seen in her collection of sarees, her golden bangles, braided hair, her bowls, and colanders. She teaches certain traditional Indian practices to little boy Eliot; like not wearing shoes inside the house. The dinner table is set without napkins and silverware as the Americans do. She makes an exaggerated description of the Indian blade. Mrs. Sen also exhibits the excellent art of chopping vegetables, fish, and chicken. It shows how Indian women use the nostalgic experiences of their homeland to define their identity. Speaking about the concept of homeland, Ravi G. in his article “Postcolonialism: Its meaning and Significance” states:

The concept of home is very important in our lives. It gives us a sense of place in the world. It tells us where we belong. As an idea, it stands for shelter, stability, security and comfort. To be at home is to occupy a location where we are welcome; we are with people very much like ourselves. One has a feeling of disjunction. Home appears to be far removed in time and space. It is available for return only through an act of imagination. Thus home becomes a mental construct. (13)

Mrs. Sen feels secure and comforted when she gets letters from her family and when she speaks over the phone in her own language. She is happy when she sees fish from the seaside. She does not get such tasty fish anywhere in America not even in the Supermarket. When she is asked to try them she states “In the supermarket I can feed a cat thirty-two dinners from one of thirty-two tins, but I can never find a single fish I like, never a single fish” (Lahiri, Interpreter of Maladies 123). She recalls how her people in Calcutta ate fish in the morning for breakfast and for dinner at night and like snacks after the school hours. The reminiscences of Mrs. Sen shows how some people even eat eggs and head of the fish in India. She avers that it is available in her hometown in any market and at any hour from morning till midnight. It conveys that
Mrs. Sen constantly searches for her home culture to discover her inner joy to find the meaning of her life in her new surroundings.

In “This Blessed House” Twinkle realises the need for freedom in the American culture by assimilating and accepting it. Twinkle is an example of the Indian woman who defines her individuality in the American culture and she is a “new woman on her way in quest of her identity” (Kaushal, 206). The second generation Diasporic woman like Twinkle accepts her Americanised ethos after her marriage with Sanjeev and after shifting from Boston to Connecticut. She is a woman in quest of her new identity. Twinkle’s discovery of her freedom in America is seen as narrated from Sanjeev’s point of view. Speaking about the characters in Interpreter of Maladies Rajeshwarr Mittapalli in his article “Hybrid Identities” states the characters have a “clash between assimilation and resistance finally finding its compromise in hybridity” (160). It can be noted in the way Twinkle assimilates the two cultures by keeping a western name, Twinkle. The narrator comments on her name that Twinkle is in itself an interesting name or nickname. She prefers to be called Twinkle which she feels is a name originating from a nursery rhyme and associated with the little Star. Her childlike enthusiasm, playfulness, and discovery of inner happiness give her a sense of direction. She re-shapes her name and personality by forging her identity with her actual name, Tanima to Twinkle named after an actress in Bombay- Dimple Kapadia and her sister Simple. It delineates how a Hindu woman who is in search of her identity can get accustomed to the western culture to find her happiness.

The discovery of Christian items in her new house is symbolic and significant to locate her identity. Twinkle tells her guests that it is a ‘treasure hunt’ and she feels good about it. Twinkle discovers a white porcelain effigy of Christ, a 3-D postcard of
Saint Francis, a wooden cross key-chain, a framed paint-by-number of the three wise men against a black velvet background, tucked in the linen closet, a tile trivet depicting a blond, unbearded Jesus delivering the Sermon on the Mount, a small plastic snow-filled dome containing a miniature Nativity scene and a plastic statue of the Virgin Mary. Twinkle wants the statues on the mantelpiece in her house. She confidently asserts that “This is our house. We own it together. The statue is a part of our property.” (149) It conveys that women in different locations discover their inner freedom. When their guests, Douglas and his girlfriend Nora notice the statue of the Virgin Mary on the front lawn of her house, they are confused if the couple is Hindu or Christian.

Lahiri portrays the identity crisis of Twinkle when she is abandoned by her first American lover at the age of twenty seven. Yet her search for identity does not end in despair. Rather, she agrees to the matchmaker’s offer to marry Sanjeev. They get married in India in the midst of hundreds of well-wishers in the month of August under a red and orange tent strung with Christmas tree lights on Mandeville Road, India. After the wedding, she is assimilated into the American culture by owning a house in Hartford. Her westernised culture can be witnessed when she prepares stew made with fish adding vinegar in it. She crosses legs and smokes or drinks like an American. Her identity can be noticed when she complains that she hates to chop garlic and ginger. She does not know how to operate Indian blender and allows Sanjeev to season mustard oil with cinnamon sticks and cloves to make curry.

Sanjeev wants to get rid of the anti-Hindu statues as they are not Christians. But Twinkle finds it difficult to part with them. The question of cultural clash becomes a major problem for them. So, Twinkle tries to find fulfilment in the
Christian statues by associating them with the Christian faith of the American world. Yet, Twinkle’s quick reply, “No, we’re not Christian. We’re good little Hindus” (137) depicts her struggle for identity. Despite her identity as a high caste Hindu woman, she is placed between two cultural worlds and adapts herself to her personal convictions. It is to support what Elizabeth Jackson opines in her article “Transcending the Politics of “Where You’re From” that globalisation encourages people to look beyond artificial division of nationality, ethnicity, religion, and other forms of cultural identity to envision a world community that is inclusive without being homogenous. In a globalised world, Twinkle wants to create close connection between people and reduce any forms of conflict. Her desire for a harmonious living is seen when she kisses the head of the Christ statue and places it on top of the mantelshelf. These statues were left by the previous owners who were born-again Christians. It reflects her inner freedom and integrated life to hold on to her personal convictions.

Twinkle’s identity can be compared with Sanjeev’s. He is a well-educated man from Boston who moves to Connecticut to work for a firm near Hartford. His consideration for the position of a vice president at the age of thirty three is his greatest achievement. A dozen people work under him. He recollects his walk each evening across the Mass from Avenue bridge to buy Mughlai chicken with spinach from his favourite Indian restaurant on the other side of the Charles. When Sanjeev studies the items on the mantelpiece left by Twinkle, they puzzle him as he feels they lack a sense of sacredness. He is more baffled to see his wife’s interest in them. The objects meant something to Twinkle, but they meant nothing but were irritation to him. As a result he is intolerant, angry, and disrespectful. Considering his conflicting
identity with Twinkle, it is perceived how Indian Diasporic woman like Twinkle aspire for an identity that helps her to create harmony within self and others.

In the differences of opinion between Sanjeev and Twinkle, the writer discovers the identity of a Diasporic Indian woman who has tolerance towards western culture. Twinkle’s westernised name indicates her social freedom to accept western culture that gives her personal happiness. Lahiri portrays a character that defines her identity by rejecting the imposed ideologies of religion, beliefs, faith, traditions of her husband, and adopts her own way of life for personal happiness. She fights against the rigid Indian religious ethos of her husband and experiences inner joy by adopting a tolerant stand. The couple experiences an emotional drift. Their divided self is reflected in the phrases “This house is blessed” and “we are not Christians.”(137)

“This Blessed House” becomes the house of Twinkle who does not compromise with Sanjay’s Indian traditional practices. It causes temporary domestic disharmony and unhappiness. Yet, Twinkle discovers her inner freedom of expression. It depicts Twinkle’s individual values give her a sense of conviction, direction, and personal fulfilment in Diasporic living. Twinkle’s desire for independence helps her for religious and cultural liberty. She teaches her husband about mutual understanding, tolerance, respect, dignity, love, and concern. It is how Twinkle subverts the Patriarchal notion of male-ownership of the house and re-arranges her new house by placing the statues on the mantelpiece. Twinkle feels at home in her ‘This Blessed House’ and exercises her freedom even to crush the cigarettes she smoked during the weekends. Twinkle’s life metaphorically embodies a middle class Indian woman and her relationship with self, her family, and society in the American culture. The story ends on a positive and open-ended note where the
narrator states that Sanjeev had followed her to live in the same house. It depicts Twinkle as an independent Indian Diasporic woman who has her own way of leading a life of dignity, self-respect, tolerance, and freedom. It suggests that she has an integrating power that binds her husband for unity and harmony. At the end, Sanjeev is made to embrace differences of opinion and to live in harmony respecting the individual freedom of his wife.

Mala in, “The Third and Final Continent” is another important woman character taken for study to locate the identity struggles of traditional Indian women in America. Her identity is revealed by her husband, the narrator, who goes back to Nineteen sixty four, when he was in England as an Indian Diasporic bachelor and a commerce student; after his marriage with Mala he was working as a librarian in the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Boston. The story oscillates between the narrator’s past in Calcutta and his present life in America with his wife Mala. He also narrates his experience of toiling hard to educate himself, despite his emotional and cultural barriers in America. The reasons for the migration from India to America and the discovery of their self in their diasporic lives are the main elements of the story. Speaking about the migration of Postcolonial Indians, in his “Introduction” to The Indian Diaspora: Dynamics of Migration, N. Jayaram opines that the immigration of Indians in the first instance has generally been a male phenomenon. This aspect is seen in the voice of the narrator. Lahiri records a male-voice that delineates the lives of Indian women and their drudgery in the Diasporic cultural context.

The story focuses on the narrator’s wife, Mala and her search for identity in America. It explores the strange destiny of Mala and the constraints of marital life in an American culture. Despite the challenges, Mala’s search for identity in her different cultural experience is noteworthy. Primarily, Lahiri subverts male-power by
not giving a name to the narrator. It is here that her creativity is exhibited to undermine male-domination and gender discrimination. It delineates how women are silenced and suppressed even in the Diasporic existence. The need for identity of Indian women revealed by Lahiri is to give voice to her woman by representing their lives through the perception of men.

The narrator as a husband speaks of the subaltern position of his counterpart by recalling her newly married life when for six weeks she wore the iron bangle and applied vermillion power to the parting in her hair to convey to the others that she was a bride. After the arrival in Boston to a world of material security and economic freedom, Mala experiences a desperate sense of loneliness, alienation, and an identity crisis. It reveals the helplessness of the newly married Indian woman to cope with a new culture with its own set of values. She is a traditional woman and tries to cover her head with her sari as a mark of respect for her husband. It portrays Mala’s struggle in her quest for acceptance and accommodation. Mala is a woman with strong convictions and her life is an epitome of an Indian woman in America. The narrator reveals that his wife was a proposal bring about by his elder brother and his wife. He considers the proposition with neither objection nor enthusiasm. He takes it to be the duty of every man to accept a woman in arranged marriage. He records her familial background:

the daughter of a school teacher in Beleghata.... She could cook, knit, embroider, sketch landscapes, and recite poems by Tagore, but these talents could not make up for the fact that she did not possess a fair complexion, and so a string of men had rejected her up to the face. She was twenty-seven, an age when her parents had begun to fear that she would never marry, and so they were willing to ship their only child halfway across the world in order to save her from spinsterhood. (181)
Mala’s subaltern experience is seen in the way she is undermined by not getting a suitable partner. It is in family, marriage, and motherhood that Lahiri reconstructs the subaltern identity of Mala. Speaking about motherhood, Lahiri opines on her interview with Arun Aguiar, “Motherhood, in particular, makes me look at life in an entirely different way” (180). Mala’s experience in conjugal relations makes her look at life with positivity and hope. In Mala, it is expressed how a married woman in the different culture, experiences contentment despite hybridity.

To discuss about Mala’s hybridity, for her America does not seem to be a favoured place. She feels it is a melting pot where her traditional culture collides with the American culture to dissolve; she wants to discover her identity in the new environment. In the divergent American culture, she experiences tension and turmoil. This ‘in-between’ state paves a way for the search for her identity. Even though placed in a lonely situation in a strange culture, she endeavours to be dynamic and happy. In her article “Broken identities”, Indira Nityanandana expresses her views about the causes of loneliness of Diasporic women:

In an alien land with constant cultural collisions caused by cultural transplants and leading to cultural alienation, these protagonists find it difficult to adjust, to cope, and to come to terms with the reality around them. Moreover, they are always “mourning for the homeland left behind.” They need to adjust socially, economically as well as culturally. (35)

Similarly, Mala’s search for identity is amidst the socially and culturally different environment, wherein, she seeks her freedom and asserts self. Mala’s attempt to ascertain her Indian identity in the American continent is clear in her attachment to speaking in Bengali, wearing saris, bracelets, and applying vermilion powder to the parting in her hair. This is how Mala presents her personal identity in hybridity. It is
how Lahiri reconstructs national, social, gender, ethnic, religious, and linguistic identity in Diasporic women. Mala is truly an Indian woman who is trapped in a Diasporic culture and tries to cope with it.

The analysis discusses how Mala’s search for her personal identity becomes the major concern in the story as in “Mrs. Sen’s”. Mala looks back to her ‘home’ roots for her survival. Initially, the identity she sees in America keeps her displaced and disillusioned but her constant efforts to discover her traditional ethos in her ‘home’ make her triumph over her sense of displacement, and feel a new sense of belonging. It is similar to what N. Jayaram states, “The plight of Indians as a diasporic community abroad is determined by the ethnic, religious and socio-economic composition.” (25) It is applied to the story to see a longing for ‘home’ becomes Mala’s major preoccupation. She transcends the tensions of Diasporic living by retaining her identity. Mala’s story is nostalgic and oscillates between two worlds: Indian and American. A portrayal of the Indian Diasporic woman with her fears, trials, tribulations, and her tireless effort to assert her identity is seen in Mala.

There is a narration on the experiences of the couple, Mala and her husband which speaks about their hybrid identity in which create their own space. They feel a strong inclination towards their traditions. They have decided to grow old and open-minded keeping in mind their identities as Indians by using their fingers to eat rice on weekends with their son. They want to visit Calcutta every few years, and bring back more drawstrings, pyjamas, and Darjeeling Tea. It reflects that the need for an Indian identity in America is the deepest longing of the most Indians abroad. Mala has a feeling that her husband eats rice for breakfast like any other Bengali husband does, so, she keeps a plate with a spoonful of salt at the table. Her Diasporic experiences can be seen in the following:
Mala had travelled far from home, not knowing where she was going, or what she would find, for no reason other than to be my wife. As strange as it seemed, I knew in my heart that one day her death would affect me, and stranger still, that mine would affect her. I wanted somehow to explain this to Mrs. Croft, who was still scrutinizing Mala from top to toe with what seemed to be placid disdain. I wondered if Mrs. Croft had ever seen a woman in a sari, with a dot painted on her forehead and bracelets stacked on her wrists. (195)

It signifies that as an Indian woman, Mala experiences strangeness in the Diasporic set up. Mala holds on her ethnic identity and forges her authenticity. It creates a close affinity between the husband and wife as there is no breakdown of their traditional family values. It communicates that Mala’s personal and traditional values bind her for a life of mutual harmony and integration.

In striking contrast between Mala and Mrs. Croft, an American woman, the cultural values of Indian women can be examined. Mala and Mrs. Croft are from different cultures and therefore have different identities. If Mrs. Croft is independent and liberal, Mala is dependent. Mrs. Croft, a hundred and three year old widow is alone in her big house. Mala as an Indian woman, experiences social and ethnic differences as she sees Mrs. Croft as tiny and extremely old. Mrs. Croft’s hair looked like a ‘mass of snow’ that arranged like a small sack on top of her head, her long black skirt spread like a ‘stiff tent to the floor’, and a starched white shirt with ruffles at the throat and cuffs; her hands folded together in her lap with long pallid fingers with swollen knuckles and tough yellow nails. Age had battered her looks to resemble a man, with sharp-shrunken eyes and prominent creases on either side of her nose. Her lips were chapped, faded, and nearly disappeared. Her eyebrows were missing altogether. But her look was fierce. There is a peculiarity about her mannerisms and
tastes. She is choosy about her culture and nationality. She is interested in listening to the radio for an update on the latest news about Americans planting a flag on the moon. She talks, entertains, and rents rooms to boys who are from ‘Howard or Tech’. Mrs. Croft is a direct contrast to Mala who has a kind and caring voice. Mala’s eyes are bright with amusement. As an Indian wife, Mala is diligent in her obligations, loves her husband, and is very sensitive towards his needs. Lahiri’s portrayal of Mala is to describe how the traditional Indian woman asserts her identity despite difficulties.

From the beginning of her wedded life, Mala faces many inconveniences in her in-laws house. Before coming to America, the narrator spends only six weeks with her in Calcutta. Even though he spends only five nights with her, the details he provides are enough to establish her identity as an authentic Indian woman. Lahiri records the male’s voice to evaluate the hidden recesses of Diasporic Indian women in the following:

For five nights we shared a bed. Each of those nights, after applying cold cream and braiding her hair which she tied up at the end with a black cotton string, she turned from me and wept; she missed her parents. Although I would be leaving the country in a few days, custom dictated that she was now a part of my household, and for the next six weeks she was to live with my brother and his wife, cooking, cleaning serving tea and sweets to guests. (181)

Lahiri portrays the subaltern-consciousness in Mala whose life is the epitome of Indian women striving to cope with the daily challenges in their married lives. In all aspects of her life, Mala proves to be a worthy Indian woman. After coming to America, she carefully handles all the hurdles in the family set up. Although, the American life has raised the economic condition of Mala, yet she is not economically
free. Lahiri emphasises the need for education and employment for Indian women to live independently. Mala is dependent on her husband for everything. The dependence of Mala is observed by her husband as follows:

It was my duty to take care of Mala to welcome her and protect her. I would have to buy her first pair of snow boots, her first winter coat. I would have to tell her which streets to avoid, which way the traffic came, tell her to wear sari so that the free end did not drag on the footpath. A five-mile separation from her parents, I recalled with some irritation, had caused her to weep. (190)

It signifies that Mala is dependent on her husband. She had to ask him even for a few dollars. This depicts unemployed women lack of economic freedom in the Diasporic land. Lahiri portrays that Indian women are economically dependent on their husbands and have to be socially escorted. He takes her around the city, taking a walk to the Charles River to watch sailboats, eating ice cream at Harvard Yard, and to meet other Bengalis. It is a challenge for Indian women to break free from the shackles yet Mala goes out with him in a spirit of endurance. Despite the challenge, Mala is trustworthy when given economic freedom. She proves to be responsible in the use of her husband’s money and accounts for it while buying a potato peeler, a tablecloth, and chicken curry with fresh garlic and ginger. Mala is devoted to her husband in supporting all his endeavours and loves him sincerely. It is her sound character that has contributed to her identity.

In the title story “Unaccustomed Earth”, Ruma, a thirty eight year old and a second generation Indian Diasporic woman discovers her individuality in Seattle by getting married to an American, Adam, against the wishes of her parents. After the marriage she moves from Brooklyn with her husband and their son Akash to their new house built in the mid-century style. Her identity in the new house as an Indian
woman begins when she remembers her Bengali roots by contrasting her life with that of her mother, Aparna. She realises that her mother was a traditional Indian woman who was apprehensive of Ruma’s wedding with an American who might divorce her, looking out for an American girl. Knowing the American culture, Ruma was confident and ready to take the risk. She was a lawyer by profession but after Akash was born she worked a part-time schedule at her law firm. After the second pregnancy her priorities change and she becomes a homemaker taking care of her children. It shows how Diasporic women are responsible and seek an independent life in the interest of their children. Ruma’s painful experience is perceived when she recalls losing her mother who dies of heart attack on the operating table. Lahiri portrays the importance of maternal bonding in Mala and her mother that forges the identity of Diasporic women.

Ruma recollects that her widowed father had retired from the pharmaceutical company after her mother’s death and had begun to travel to Europe. In the recent past, he had visited France, Holland, and Italy with package tours. Ruma contrasts her father’s tours to that of hers which was a ‘month-long EuroRail Holiday’ with her friends after her college studies from the money saved from her salary buying nothing but the same postcards which her father sent on his tour visits. Ruma is not aware that her father has a travel companion and a friend, Mrs. Bagchi from Long Island. Her authentic identity can be discovered when she is worried about her father’s whereabouts as a ‘lonely old man’. She wants to be a dutiful daughter by taking care of him and yet at the same time she knows she has to get her husband’s consent. There is an anguish and anxiety in deciding whether to keep her father in her house or not due to her multiple responsibilities as a wife and mother. Ruma is seen worried
and constantly making decisions about her father’s stay. It reflects how the sensibilities of Ruma demand for compromises and adjustments.

The anxiety of Ruma is caused after her immigration to America due to her marriage and family constraints. Ruma recalls “her mother’s example -moving to a foreign place for the sake of marriage, caring exclusively for children and a household” (Lahiri, Unaccustomed Earth 11). The ambiguity Ruma suffers is to decide between her responsibilities as a daughter towards her father and her duty as wife towards her family in a Diasporic setting. But for her mother there was a constant struggle for identity as she recalled India as an ideal world. In a certain measure, Ruma overcomes nostalgia and ambiguity which Lahiri portrays sensitively through her experience as an Indian Diasporic in America. The difference between the two generations of women, Ruma and her mother can be examined to record their social and familial freedom. Ruma seems to be independent enough to live in an American society with an empowered status while her mother as a house wife is dependent on her husband and has no economic freedom.

Lahiri interrogates the psychological dilemma of Aparna and Ruma in realising their identity after their immigration to America. Aparna’s life is about navigating between the values of her homeland and her host country. Ruma finds her identity as she assesses her relationship with her parents in Diasporic life. As a second generation immigrant, Ruma accepts American culture by marrying an American, Adam and lives with her three year old son, Akash in the new home north-east to Seattle. As the narrator of the story, she moves back in memory to record her past relationship with her parents and her brother, Romi. Ruma recalls that she had confronted her parents who always had a preference for their son. Lahiri exposes the gendered marginality of Ruma as a daughter in an Indian family that traditionally
valued a son. The parents respect Romi, their son, for having graduated from Princeton and getting a Fulbright to go abroad. In spite of his itinerant and uncertain life, Ruma knew that her father had respected and supported him. In this aspect, it is argued that Lahiri has a women-centred concern in her writing that examines the inner struggles of her women. Ruma as an Indian woman in Diasporic living is marginalised even within her own family. Ruma overlooks these matters and concentrates on her studies. It suggests Ruma’s efforts in forging her authentic self.

Several instances recalled by Ruma speak about her desire for an independent life. The search for a true identity in Ruma is culminated in the fulfilment of her personal ambition and in dignity of labour. As a student at the high school, Ruma had worked as a bus girl at a local restaurant during summers. Her mother found it difficult to accept it as it brings disgrace to the family and their relatives in India who would have found it disgraceful for a girl of her class and education. The writer also narrates how Ruma as a second generation woman is more open-minded over the choice of history as her subject of study to biology against the wishes of her father. In the choice of her life-partner Ruma faces stiff opposition and resistance from her parents. It is Ruma's own choice to marry Adam. She breaks Indian traditional roles and cultural codes imposed on her by her Indian parents by actualising her personal interests. Ruma defines her identity and asserts her individual freedom at different locations.

By locating the inner struggles for identity of Ruma, Aparna and Mrs. Bagchi, it is supported that Indian women in their Diasporic living discover their selves. The women accept assimilation and transcend their local identity as they voice against the stereotype notions of traditional Indian practices. Ruma resists the traditional lifestyle of her ancestral heritage at several instances. Mrs. Bagchi accepts the friendship
of Ruma’s father to forget her loneliness and the boredom of widowhood. Mrs. Bagchi goes against Indian traditional conventions by resisting the cultural codes. Ruma’s mother is afraid of the traditional breakdown of her home culture. She finds it difficult to accept the American culture. Her traditional way of dressing, food habits, and language suggest her passion for her native culture. In both the women Lahiri finds a contrast to depict that, the women face challenges confidently in their Diasporic context.

The lives of Ruma and her mother can be contrasted to see that Ruma is more liberated and successful. Ruma’s mother is a traditional Indian wife in America in her brightly colored saris, her dime-sized maroon bindi, and her jewels. She is ardent in following her native Indian culture. As a Bengali woman, her cultural indebtedness to her country is perceived in her mannerisms and traditional outfits. It takes her long to accept American practices. She expresses her irritation at seeing Ruma in her pants, skirts, and other western outfits. She is unable to accept the American culture. When she dies Ruma keeps a few items to honour her memory including three saris out of two hundred and eighteen saris. Aparna in Diasporic living experiences loneliness and isolation. But Ruma has acclimatised herself to the new environment and feels comfortable in it. It suggests that Ruma is educated, independent, and dignified hence is happier.

The study on the five women characters in the above discussed stories of Lahiri reveals that though they are culturally marginalised yet their quest for identity is constant and consistent. The women search for happiness in spite of their challenges. Lahiri’s detailed way of narrating every aspect of the struggles of these women makes her a distinctive Diasporic writer. She is more concerned towards the psychologically disadvantaged, the economically deprived, and the culturally
neglected Indian women like Bibi. Lahiri sensitively observes the lives of Indian women of different economic status, different cultures, and in different contexts. She enables her readers to probe deep into the lives of these Indian women. Despite the experience of psychological stress and mental afflictions, the women discover their self for freedom and peaceful co-existence. Their challenges arise out of their social contexts: familial constraints, ethnic discrimination, cultural conflict, economic imbalance, and social segregation.

The five stories of Lahiri discussed in the Chapter are realistic and hence, authentically speak of the need for women empowerment in the global context. The stories have different cultural challenges for women in American culture. The scope of Lahiri’s narrative is wide and deep, whereby she traces the family history and background of each woman character and the cultural context in which the woman has to face new challenges. Lahiri reconstructs the history of culturally marginalised women in their Diasporic experience. In the characterisation of Indian women, she depicts not only their fears, anxieties, angst, frustrations but also their happy and fulfilled lives as potential women. Thus, she rewrites their geographical and cultural lives in their own experiences. It is supported with what Tanushree Singh in her “Images of Women in The Namesake” points out that in presenting these images women writers clearly indicate the status of women in society and their subjectivity and agency. Lahiri has presented these elements in her short stories.

The investigation reveals how women try to live out their conflicting identities as part of strategy to survive in the Diasporic lives. They forge a connection between the home culture and the adoptive culture which are in opposition to each other. However, there is a vast difference in the experiences of hybridity between one character and the other. Mala’s identity crisis cannot be compared with Twinkle’s. If
Aparna is the woman of first generation Diasporic, Ruma is well assimilated to American culture as a second generation Indian woman. Both have different experiences and their search for identity also differs. The parallel experiences are located in Mala and Aparna who are traditional Indian women who belong to the first generation of Diasporic women of America.

A comparative study can be made between the women characters of Devi and Lahiri. Unlike Devi’s women, Lahiri’s do not have such traumatic and agonising experiences of poverty, sexual violence, and oppression. Although their experience of hybridity and the anxiety of alienation due to immigration have forced them to be marginalised, yet, their endurance to combat their position is significant. Through her liberated women characters Lahiri not only raises the subaltern-consciousness of the Diasporic women but examines how they move towards economic freedom by accommodating the western lifestyle. The five women are not the subaltern victims. Rather they constantly strive to awaken their consciousness for a better world of freedom. They have realised their selfhood in between the two worlds. As Nandini Sahu comments in her article, “The Nostalgic Note in their Flute” that the women find themselves crushed under the burden of alienation and rootlessness. There is a sense of loss of identity with their culture, yet they go back to their roots to discover their inner abilities. It indicates how Lahiri’s women consciously define their identity for a fuller life to exercise their social responsibility for a harmonious living.

Analysing the ten short stories of Devi and Lahiri, it is posited that Devi and Lahiri converge in many ways. Primarily, they are Bengali women writers and their stories are about Indian women living in Native and Diasporic cultures. Their subject matter revolves around culturally marginalised and patriarchally oppressed women who are proved to be confident, liberated, and authentic either in Native or Diasporic
cultural contexts by finding their path towards freedom and acceptability. The examination reveals how in their thematic concerns, the stories speak for restoring an identity and dignity for Native Indian and Diasporic subaltern women. The stories are intricately placed in the contexts where there is discrimination against women based on caste, class, ethnic, and gender to show how women who are silenced protest by affirming their identity.

Devi reconstructs Indian myth, history, facts, and fiction in her simple short stories. The language of Lahiri’s fiction is more complex with a blend of archetypical representation, motis, irony, paradox, and extended metaphor. Both present the marginalised experiences of their women through local lingo and archetypical characters. There is an attempt in both to empower women in their limited socio-economic and cultural space by recording their lives with all its challenges. The women of the stories constantly work against the stereotypical and patriarchal presumptions to define their individuality. On the whole the subaltern-consciousness stimulated by Devi and Lahiri awakens the Indian women to discover their inner self to exercise their social responsibilities.

Devi and Lahiri give similar accounts of their women in a realistic manner. The daily experiences of their women speak of the unjust and non-conducive atmosphere in which they find themselves. They also subvert these challenging contexts to ascertain their position as responsible human beings. Devi and Lahiri express a deep concern for the women that makes them write about the marginalised women. It speaks about their interest in awakening the subaltern-consciousness and to dedicate their writing to the exploited women. They also try to uphold the dignity of these women while voicing their struggles and locating their challenges. It is concluded that Devi and Lahiri’s women are ordinary human beings caught in the
humdrum of daily routine. They are either rural or urban, the professional and the illiterate, the rich or the poor but they are all women who assert their freedom within their family and society. Their transcendence speaks about their ability to reconstruct their identity in a patriarchal dominated society.

All the short stories considered in the Chapter have a similar thematic concern for universal implications in emancipating subaltern women depending on their cultural diversity. They “replace the glorified woman with the ‘real’ woman with wishes, wants and desires. The women writers have introduced realism in their stories” (Bande and Ram, 116). Having discussed the identity of the subaltern women in the ten short stories of Devi and Lahiri, the next Chapter examines how the women have resisted patriarchally constructed stereotyped identities.
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