

Spring 2023

## Ruptures in Indentures in Jhumpa Lahiri's Interpreter of Maladies and Unaccustomed Earth

Prabal D. Gupta

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RUPTURES IN INDENTURES IN JHUMPA LAHIRI'S INTERPRETER OF MALADIES AND  
UNACCUSTOMED EARTH

by

PRABAL GUPTA

(Under the Direction of Lindsey Chappell and Bradley Edwards)

ABSTRACT

Jhumpa Lahiri (1967) is one of the prominent American writers of Bengali descent, contributing mainly to diaspora literature to depict the nuanced aspects of Bengalis in their immigrant lives. Lahiri's stories in *Interpreter of Maladies* (1999) and *Unaccustomed Earth* (2008) illustrate the challenges of the Bengali diaspora due to their indentured identity, which I have used to refer to the Bengali people's culturally-rooted identity. This study investigates how the diaspora's native cultural identity fluctuates in connection with the host culture. The research renders a reconfigured image of "home" because the concept of home changes for these people after migration in "Mrs. Sen's" and "The Third and Final Continent." Lahiri's characters find it challenging to cook their culture-specific food like fish curry and speak Bengali despite building a sense of community by cooking and sharing Bengali dishes and speaking their mother tongue. The study extends the function of memory in collective recollections of the Subcontinent's historical events like Partition and Bangladesh's Liberation War in "When Mr. Pirzada Came to Dine" and "A Real Durwan." These Bengali people in Lahiri's stories recollect the historical past while recounting narratives of their lives. The study places Lahiri's stories in diaspora and migration discourses to analyze her portrayal of Bengali people's cultural retention in immigrant life and their way of intermingling with the host culture that helps them grow cosmopolitan.

INDEX WORDS: Bangladesh's Liberation War, Diaspora, Home, Indentured, Jhumpa Lahiri, Memory, Partition, Refugee

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PRABAL GUPTA

B. A. (Hons.) in English, University of Chittagong, Bangladesh, 2005

M. A. in English, University of Chittagong, Bangladesh, 2006

A Thesis Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of Georgia Southern University

in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree

MASTER OF ARTS IN ENGLISH

COLLEGE OF ARTS AND HUMANITIES

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PRABAL GUPTA

Major Professor: Lindsey Chappell  
Bradley Edwards  
Committee: Hans-Georg Erney

Electronic Version Approved:  
May 2023

## DEDICATION

To my beloved Baba, who is more than a human, larger than life– an institution

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Words are insufficient to express my gratitude to my thesis supervisors, Dr. Lindsey Chappell and Dr. Bradley Edwards. This project has come into being because of your immense support and scholarly engagement. I could not have made this possible without the unconditional support and freedom you gave me throughout the project.

I would also remember Dr. Hans-Georg Erney's contribution to the thesis committee with respect and appreciation. His suggestion is commendable and has augmented the quality of this work. I am indebted to all of you for the expertise you imparted in guiding me in this research.

I am also indebted to all my faculty members in the Department of English. I am grateful to my family and friends for their unconditional support. Thank you all for keeping me spirited and having faith in my potential.

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## CHAPTER 1

## INTRODUCTION

This study explores what I will call the “indentured” identity of an individual/ a group of people in their immigrant lives away from their ancestral homes in Jhumpa Lahiri’s (1967–) short stories. Lahiri’s stories from *Interpreter of Maladies* (1999) and *Unaccustomed Earth* (2008) depict the diasporic people’s challenges living outside their home culture. Their dilemmas include issues related to their cultural identity and sense of belonging and their struggle to comply with cultural norms while adapting to a new environment. Her stories mirror the lived experience of first-generation Bengali immigrants in the United States. Like Lahiri herself, her second-generation immigrant characters encounter intricacies of their diasporic lives, primarily of intergenerational conflicts and diasporic dilemmas associated with their ancestral home, culture, and history. These stories demonstrate how the Bengali diasporic people negotiate between their culturally inherited identities and their diasporic selves in matters of conflicts between generations, the situation of “unhomeliness” (Bhabha 9), and the “double-consciousness” (Du Bois 3) prevalent in transcultural realities.

According to OED, “indenture” means “contract, mutual engagement” between two parties that binds them into service. The word is commonly used to refer to laborers from India and other former colonies in the colonial period. These people worked on plantations and were like servants in various menial works allocated by their employers. However, I have adopted the word “indentured” for a specific reason to refer to the Bengali people’s cultural identity that they retain irrespective of place. I want to mean that these people’s identity is closely connected with the native culture that binds them to an obligation. The bond between the culture and its respondents is like a contract, not documented but reflected in actions. This contract transfers from one generation to another through their repetitive actions that shaped society’s view and approach to certain things specific to the Bengal region. This specific way of living, which these people identify as Bengaliness, is rooted deep in their heritage. Bengalis arguably like to live a culturally refined life, like cooking culture-specific food, wearing traditional clothes, and

celebrating festivals in different seasons. Bengali people's affinity to a cultural lifestyle categorizes them uniquely. They like to transmit their cultural traits to the next generations. So, when I call it the "indentured" identity of Bengali immigrants, I mean these people's culturally-rooted identity that Bengalis implicate in their daily lives. Another word I use extensively is "diaspora," which OED defines as "any group of people who have spread or become dispersed beyond their traditional homeland or point of origin." I have used this word to refer to Lahiri's Bengali immigrant characters in her stories. These immigrants build a sense of community outside their home countries through their shared experiences of food, language, culture, and common history. As these immigrants' memories of home are unforgettable, their cultural identity manifests through their actions of remembering their homes and relatives, cooking Bengali dishes, and recollecting historical events in their countries. The nuanced Bengali identity in Lahiri's stories extensively delineates Bengali immigrant characters, which no other works of Bengali descent have ever done. This study has focused on the nuanced aspects of Bengaliness and offered new perspectives to the readership by analyzing her stories from a broad spectrum.

As diasporic people stay away from their ancestral homelands, they encounter a disassociation stage that challenges their indentured cultural identity. Between the diaspora's home and host countries, an "interstitial [sic] space" (Bhabha 312) creates ambiguity in their perception of cultural identity. Since diasporic people are in that liminal space, they generate new stories of diversity in their host country. Their new narratives obliterate the determining lines between their ancestral home and their home abroad. Like other diasporic people, Bengali immigrants' mobility and their temporal and spatial boundaries give liminality to their identity. As this diasporic identity is always "hyphenated" and splits the diaspora to oscillate between their past and present, their experience is ambivalent, ripping their emotions and arousing a dilemma in their daily actions. "Diasporic citizenship," as Susan Koshy states, "offers Lahiri a powerful vehicle for exploring emergent field frames and unsettled identities" (598). For instance, first-generation immigrant characters encounter cultural unhomeliness and struggle to reconcile with their double consciousness. Du Bois also maintains that this peculiarity of feeling "two-ness" (3) in one's identity is common in diasporic experiences. Among Lahiri's diasporic characters, this indentured identity

varies from generation to generation. First-generation immigrants create a remoteness with their diasporic identities because of their lived experiences in their home culture. In contrast, second-generation immigrants deviate from their indentured identities. They condone this diversion from their rooted identity and tend to assimilate into the transcultural situation, accommodating the cultural attributes of the host country into their personal and social behavior.

Lahiri's first-generation immigrant characters oscillate between their diasporic and indentured identities because of their experiences of homes and their new life after migration. In *Interpreter of Maladies*, her characters, such as Mrs. Sen ("Mrs. Sen's") and the unnamed male narrator ("The Third and Final Continent"), have deep-rooted memories of home and culture. They have spent a significant period of their lives in their homeland, which has fostered their cultural peculiarities and nuances. After migration, the transcultural reality creates a binary relationship between their experiences of home in their homeland and host country. Mrs. Sen feels nostalgic for her ancestral home in Kolkata because of her missing Bengali culture in her diasporic homeland. Mrs. Sen's contradiction with the host culture shows an abortive migration and many unforeseen challenges of the first-generation diaspora in coping with cross-cultural situations. By contrast, the narrator's success in "The Third and Final Continent" represents a symbiotic relationship with the host culture that is still possible. As Lahiri's diasporic characters develop an ambivalent relationship with their homeland and host country, their dilemmas manifest in their diasporic life.

Lahiri's immigrant characters remember their homes, recounting stories of their accounts connected with their people back home and the Subcontinent's history. As immigrant life is about nostalgic recollections of home, family, and historical events in the diaspora's homelands, remembering is crucial to keep the diaspora's memory alive. They form a sense of community through this process. As memory is the product of repetition, as noticed in Boori Ma's instance in "A Real Durwan," diasporic people frequently remember home and family members in nostalgic tones. They recall their past so often that distinguishing their past and present becomes difficult. Lahiri's characters, such as Lilia ("When Mr. Pirzada Came to Dine"), the narrator ("The Third and Final Continent"), and Hema ("Once in a

Lifetime”), depend primarily on their memories in narrating their stories of achievements and successes. Though Boori Ma and Mrs. Sen rely on their memories to recollect their past, their stories are of failed immigration.

Two different narrative perspectives in Lahiri’s stories tell the narrative of immigrants’ success and failure in their immigrant lives. The stories with first-person narrative recount success stories of immigration, whereas the third-person narrative perspective depicts failure. The first-person narrative in “When Mr. Pirzada Came to Dine,” “The Third and Final Continent,” and “Once in a Lifetime” tells the stories of Bengali immigrants’ success in their diasporic homeland. Lilia and Hema’s families exemplify successful immigration, and these families’ success is understandable by analyzing the migration pattern that the narrator represents in “The Third and Final Continent.” The narrator’s immigration means that becoming successful in immigrant life depends on the aspirants’ communication and professional skills that augment chances to succeed. In contrast, the stories with third-person narrative in “A Real Durwan” and “Mrs. Sen’s” manifest failures as in Boori Ma and Mrs. Sen’s instances. Boori Ma and Mrs. Sen exemplify unsuccessful immigration because they lack social skills. Boori Ma fails to draw attention to her building community that is numb to her suffering as a refugee. In Mrs. Sen’s case, her incompetencies in negotiating between her identities as a Bengali and an immigrant complicate her life. These two narrative techniques serve distinctively in each story’s plot construction and contribute to the story’s purpose.

In Lahiri’s stories, the first-person narrative demonstrates the narrator’s agency because the narrator’s embodiment influences narrative perspectives and course of action. The narrator establishes ownership, employing authority to include and erase incidents accordingly. For instance, Lilia’s anxiety is reflected in her narrative construct and tonality when she comes to know about Bangladesh’s Liberation War, employing her concern for Mr. Pirzada’s family during this humanitarian crisis and celebrating Bangladesh’s independence. In contrast, the storyteller remains reclusive in the third-person narrative and represents the characters from a distance. As the narrator and the characters are separate entities, this disembodiment renders an impersonal tone to the story. In Boori Ma’s case, the reader is clueless about

what happened to her husband and four daughters and how she lost her connection with them. Lahiri's stories play with both narrative perspectives, emphasizing personal accounts and collective memories to construct narrative structures.

First-generation immigrants depend on their ability and willingness to adjust to a transcultural location where their tendency to assimilate into the host culture makes them successful and ensures co-existence with others. Because of the transcultural reality, the diaspora's identity is relative and demonstrates fluidity despite being indentured and showing affinity to their home culture. One cannot deny culture's direct influence in forming identity. Even though identity formation is culture-specific and has a strong connection with people and communities, it has the fluidity to transform and adapt based on the location of culture. Accepting good aspects of other cultures and societies becomes problematic if someone remains rigid and fixed in identity. Stuart Hall affirms that identity is a "production" that is never "complete" (222). Instead, identity is a dynamic process. "Identity can be homicidal," as Roger Kennedy points out, "when it becomes singular and disrespectful of differences" (39). Identity is "safer" if it accepts variety and diversity in every sector. A specific type of Lahiri's diasporic characters holds cosmopolitan views though they form a sense of community through their culturally nuanced norms. Her immigrant characters accept the cultural influences of the host culture and intermingle with people of other races and cultures. The story "When Mr. Pirzada Came to Dine" epitomizes a cosmopolitan society as people of different ethnicities and cultures co-exist. Lilia's parents accept cultural diversity by allowing Lilia to participate in the Halloween party with Dora, even though they celebrate their nuanced native identity by cooking Bengali dishes and entertaining their guest, Mr. Pirzada. They also enjoy listening to the songs of Kishore Kumar. This singer is arguably the most popular playback singer of modern songs who has amused his audience over generations. Lilia's parents' situation demonstrates that diasporic people can simultaneously be respectful of their indentured and diasporic identities. This approach to forming one's identity demonstrates "humanizing" (Kennedy 39) aspects that comply with others and recognize diversity in society. Lahiri's diasporic characters exhibit this global view, accommodating the

variety in American society. The narrator and his wife, Mala (“The Third and Final Continent”), have fluidity in their identity as Bengali Americans and fit in the socio-cultural landscape of their host country.

Like her diasporic characters, Lahiri is between her two identities: her ethnic and culturally rooted identity as a Bengali and her fostering and hyphenated identity as a Bengali American. Lahiri’s lived experience has taught her that her personality is divided between these two, allowing her to explore fluidity in her characters. In her interview with Charlie Rose, Lahiri mentions she is “more comfortable observing life.” Her observational power needs to be addressed because this quality allows her to know about different attributes of human qualities and situations. In another interview with *The New Yorker*, Lahiri states that writing is about “entering into other people’s consciousness.” She has developed an understanding from her intimate observation that helps her depict various characters. In an interview with a Bengali television channel, Lahiri asserts:

কলকাতা আছে; প্রত্যেকটা বইয়ের মধ্যে কলকাতা আছে; কারণ, কলকাতা এসেই আমি লিখতে শুরু করি। মানে, ওখানেও লিখতাম ছোটবেলায়, স্কুলে। এটা ওটা লিখতাম। কিন্তু কলকাতায় এসে, মানে, মা-বাবা নিয়ে আসতো। মনে হতো, অনেকদিন থাকতাম। মা-বাবা বাজার কেনাকাটা করছে। আমি ঘরেই বসে থাকতাম। একটা খাতা নিয়ে এটা ওটা লিখতাম। (“Somehow Kolkata is there; in every book, Kolkata is there because I began writing while visiting Kolkata. In my childhood, I wrote nothing specific in school, just this and that. When I visited Kolkata with my parents, they were buying things from the market, and I sat for long hours at home with a notebook and wrote this and that.” (My translation)

Lahiri’s visits to Kolkata hold a special place in her writing because of her experiences from those visits. Her childhood is the formative phase of developing her sensibility to Bengali idiosyncrasies. Her characters, in almost every story, have connections with Kolkata. In another interview with Tina Srebotnjak, Lahiri asserts that her life has been divided between “two worlds all the time,” holding none of these identities firmly. Her diasporic identity has influenced her to depict her immigrant characters

vividly. At the same time, Lahiri's connection with Kolkata suffices with her knowledge of that particular place and its people, which her stories represent extensively.

Lahiri's short stories cover a range of diasporic subjectivities in contemporary South Asian diaspora and migration narratives. Sukanya Banerjee argues that modern scholarship on diaspora requires a unified attempt to remain responsive to the "multiplicity of global histories and movements" (3). Lahiri extensively illustrates diverse nuances of the Bengali diaspora in her stories. Her narratives project the challenges these diasporic people encounter due to their cultural, ethnic, and other differences in their host country. Lahiri's work is part of the "Diaspoetics" (Banerjee 2) because of the nuanced Bengali aspects. Lahiri's various immigrant characters help to show the contribution of the scattered Bengali diaspora in the United States. Her diasporic characters include people from refugees to skilled expatriates in the metropolises. The subjectivity in her narratives is central to the discussion of Bengali nuances. Her stories expound on various aspects of Bengali cultural idiosyncrasies. As a diaspora writer, Lahiri is pertinent to migration literature because no other diasporic writer of Bengali descent has written so extensively about the Bengali diaspora. Referring to Tasha Robinson's review, Greg Clinton mentions that Lahiri's writing about Bengali immigrants in the United States will not stop as long as these people struggle to adapt to their diasporic homes (64). As long as the Bengali diasporic people exist, Lahiri is pertinent because of her focus on the identity of Bengaliness. Her characters are aware of their indentured identities. This awareness allows them to maintain a check and balance between their culturally-rooted and cosmopolitan identities. These diasporic people remember home, culture, and history in nostalgia. They form a sense of community through their repetitive actions of cooking and sharing Bengali food, showing hospitality, and participating in recollections of historical events in their diasporic lives.

Lahiri's stories introduce diverse groups of diasporas and their complexities in diasporic lives. One of these diasporas is "exo-diasporas" (Koshy 596), who live outside the Subcontinent as immigrants, primarily in Western countries of Europe and America. Lahiri's characters are skilled migrants, primarily technocrats, who live settled lives in metropolises of the United States. These highly educated Bengali immigrants construct a sense of community through their idiosyncratic cultural behaviors and norms that

identify them as Bengali, irrespective of their places of origin. In “When Mr. Pirzada Came to Dine,” Lilia’s parents and Mr. Pirzada form a community of Bengali exo-diasporas despite their differences in nationalities. They belong to the Subcontinent and are culturally and ethnically homogenous. Likewise, the narrator in “The Third and Final Continent” represents this group as he migrates to Boston and is a successful case of immigration. Lahiri’s childhood experiences might have influenced her depiction of these diasporic characters. As narrators in Lahiri’s stories, Lilia and Hema represent their childhood memories while telling their narratives. In addition, most of her Bengali subjects are first-generation immigrants who migrated to the metropolises of the United States, like Lahiri’s parents. These immigrant characters are engineers, professors, or librarians like her father. As Bengali parents raised Lahiri, she has a practical sense of how Bengali people live in the diasporic environment. Her household setting gave her familiarity with cultural nuances that she incorporated into the depiction of each character. She had an impeccable understanding of Bengali culture and the transcultural domestic atmosphere. Lahiri’s precise observation contributes to her ability to sketch a cohort of characters who are typically Bengalis but engrossed with diasporic complexities.

We can see the resonances of Lahiri’s biography through the depiction of Boori Ma’s character. The portrayal of Boori Ma represents the multidimensionality in Lahiri’s stories as Lahiri not only concerns the diasporic subjectivity of Bengali immigrants in the United States but also considers the marginalized section of society as the subjects in her writing. Boori Ma resembles the homeless refugee Lahiri might have encountered during her visits to Kolkata. Lahiri might likely meet someone like Boori Ma or hear from others because a vast slum area still exists on the outskirts of Kolkata where refugees live in tiny, clustered houses in inhumane situations. Boori Ma represents the marginalized section of society. She cannot protest her marginalization as a subaltern even though she talks a lot. She laments the loss due to Partition. She works as the caretaker of a building in Kolkata, living on the grace of others. Boori Ma belongs to the group of the “endo-diasporas” (Koshy 596), and her marginality represents that she is a “refugee diaspora,” as coined by Pablo Bose (58). Endo-diasporas are a body of diasporas who live within the Subcontinent but somehow cross their national borders to live outside their homelands.



Endo-diasporas moved from one country to another in the Subcontinent as refugees due to political upheavals. These people moved within the Subcontinent, settling elsewhere away from their ancestral homes. Despite millions calling their new place home, many migrants struggled to find a comfortable place that they could call their home but lived as refugees. They are still in misery and cannot forget this controversial demarcation of boundaries and dislocation of homes. People like Boori Ma migrated from one location to another in search of homes. As millions migrated to both sides of the borders between India and Pakistan, Boori Ma's migration to Kolkata demonstrates the influence of political upheaval upon individuals. During Bangladesh's Liberation War, a massive influx of people occurred in 1971. That was the second phase of migration. Millions thronged the fringe of West Bengal and other neighboring areas of India to save their lives from the Pakistani army's brutality. Though many people settled, several million gathered on the outskirts of Kolkata. The portrayal of a marginalized subject shows Lahiri's familiarity with the Subcontinent's sociopolitical issues. These people represent the marginalized section of society and differ from the first diasporic group in Lahiri's stories regarding their socio-economic conditions.

Boori Ma's homelessness is a collective social and political failure because the Subcontinent's political practice classified people based on their socioeconomic backgrounds and stratified them based on their identities. After Boori Ma migrates to Kolkata, she represents the people who are part of the "refugee diaspora" even though she is also a Bengali, like the majority population in the city. In defining and distinguishing diasporas, Bose asserts: "Diasporas take many forms beyond the traditional notion of persecuted victims forced to flee their homeland, though the enduring image of diasporic communities remains bound not to the notion of migration, but rather to that of forced displacement" (56). Bose's observation clarifies how Partition refugees are victims of political persecution, and the tumultuous situations in their home countries compel them to migrate to other countries. Boori Ma's separation from her family and people is overbearing. Though Boori Ma leaves her homeland and becomes a refugee in Kolkata to avoid violence in her home country, she traps herself in the vicious cycle of poverty. Bose mentions that refugee diasporas differ from other diaspora communities worldwide. Boori Ma's history

distinguishes her from other poor Kolkatans because of her rootlessness in Kolkata. Alongside many different types of migrations, the migration of East Bengalis to West Bengal after Partition has brought economic differences between these two groups of people– the newly migrated East Bengalis in West Bengal and the rooted, original inhabitants. Partition victims lost homes and wealth and relocated to West Bengal to avoid violence. As Bose argues, the trauma of Partition is well understood if we consider the personal suffering of millions in the Punjab and Bengal regions. Like Boori Ma, millions lost their homes and migrated to new places based on their religious and cultural affinities. In the Bengal region, Hindus and Muslims migrated to both sides, thinking they would have a better life in their new home. For millions of Partition immigrants, that dream of having a promised home remained elusive because their leaders failed in planning the rehabilitation.

The repetitive action of preparing Bengali dishes, consuming them, and sharing the food with others is an integral part of diasporic life and a ritual for these people. Bengali immigrant women are central to maintaining things at home and preparing food. Laura Anh Williams points out that Lahiri's female characters, like Lilia's mother, Mrs. Sen, and Shibani, use food preparation rituals to construct their ethnic identity and generate a sense of authority (70). These diasporic women value culture-specific food, which nourishes the consumers and caters to their tastes. In addition to that, this food ritual might have roots in Bengal's history. Bengal experienced two great famines; the most recent was in 1943, and millions died from starvation. From that experience, these people might know the significance of preparing and sharing food. In contrast, deviating from that cultural norm gives them a sense of loss. By enjoying Bengali food, these people recollect their memories of home and keep their cultural identity alive. The next chapter, "Home, Identity, and the Function of Nostalgia," elaborates on the significance of food in the Bengali diaspora's lives across stories.

## CHAPTER 2

## HOME, IDENTITY, AND THE FUNCTION OF NOSTALGIA

“মাছে ভাতে বাঙ্গালী” (“Fish and rice are what makes a Bengali”)

Lahiri’s diasporic community represents their native culture in their host country through social activities like sharing food and speaking the same language. In Lahiri’s “Mrs. Sen’s” and “The Third and Final Continent,” the home is an identity marker for Lahiri’s diasporic characters, as Mrs. Sen wants to retain the memory of her native home, and the unnamed narrator embraces his diasporic home. For Mrs. Sen, her apartment does not fit to be her “home” as it lacks the cultural components of a home. Her diasporic life misses the company of her family and relatives, and she feels alienated in her present life in Rhode Island. Mrs. Sen also encounters challenges from her inability to drive and the unavailability of fresh fish. Her indentured identity challenges her diasporic life, making her immigration complicated. The availability of desired things that Mrs. Sen used to have in her Kolkata life makes sense for a home for her in Rhode Island. In contrast, in “The Third and Final Continent,” the narrator and his wife, Mala,” assimilate them into their diasporic culture and call their Boston house home. Despite their assimilation, the narrator and Mala show allegiance to their native culture tangentially. At least, while their son visits them on weekends, they enjoy Bengali cultural life by eating rice. Though Mrs. Sen’s memories of home disrupt her diasporic life, as she talks about her family and Kolkata life in a nostalgic tone, the narrator’s family fits quite comfortably in their diasporic lives. This chapter investigates how Mrs. Sen considers her home in Kolkata, indexing that life as her identity, which differs from the narrator and Mala as they look forward to everything in Boston when they call this place home.

One distinct way Bengali people mark their identity is the way they cook Bengali dishes. Bakirathi Mani mentions that South Asian immigrants expose their identity by cooking familiar and known foods (34). Mani also explains that these shared practices contribute to forming the community in the diaspora as these cultural standards build uniformity and “fictive kinship” (34) among the South Asian diaspora. Though postcoloniality determines this material-driven identity of South Asian immigrants in

the United States, it is also possible that, as Mani contends, these people may differ from the “normative constructs of nationhood on the subcontinent” (34). As postcolonial subjects are always in dilemmas about which place to call their “home,” Lahiri’s characters fluctuate between their indentured and diasporic identities. In “Mrs. Sen’s” and “The Third and Final Continent,” Lahiri’s characters primarily live in big cities in the United States with their memories of home in Kolkata. Though the narrator and his wife, Mala, show allegiance to their cosmopolitan identity and accept the multicultural aspects of their immigrant lives, Mrs. Sen fails to look forward because of her memories of home in Kolkata and resistance to change, maintaining congruity with her diasporic life. Mrs. Sen’s memory of home looks ingrained, and her experience generates tension in her diasporic life. As she remembers home and relatives, she talks about her Kolkata life in a nostalgic tone. In contrast, the narrator recounts his narrative without being unbiased about his past because he has no fond memory of his Kolkata life.

Immigrants’ memories of their homelands generate tension in their diasporic lives, especially in “Mrs. Sen’s,” when these people redefine the image of a ‘home,’ considering the one in their native country as the paradigm. Mrs. Sen encounters problems assimilating with the host culture. Her acute sense of her native culture, her memory of home and relatives in Kolkata, and the unavailability of fish in Rhode Island complicate her current life. In “The Third and Final Continent,” the narrator and Mala explore their immigrant lives and pave the way to becoming successful in their immigrant lives. The narrator’s success exemplifies, as Ruvani Ranasinha mentions, the “model minority” (182). Ranasinha observes that the educated Bengali immigrants in Lahiri’s stories replicate this model. The narrator stays a few years in London with other Bengali students and migrates to Boston with a job guaranteeing a settled life. Even though these educated immigrants epitomize this model and succeed in their immigrant lives, their nostalgic recollections of home and their rooted identity, as we see in Mrs. Sen’s instance, bring forth the elements of tension in Lahiri’s migration narratives. Moreover, the diaspora’s awareness of their native culture raises fear because the distance from their homeland secludes them from their native culture. For a section of immigrants, resistance to assimilation elongates their acculturation process. Mrs. Sen’s instance is the inverse of successful immigration that the narrator shows in “The Third and the Final

Continent.” The narrator is the model of successful immigration, who migrates from Kolkata to Boston and embraces his diasporic identity, assimilating into the host culture.

Despite Bengali immigrants’ stories of success, they face dilemmas when they call their host country home. Bharati Mukherjee’s essay “Two Ways to Belong in America” elucidates some issues of perplexity from her perspective that immigrants encounter. Mukherjee points out the differences in how Mira, her sister, and she have approached immigration. While both immigrants, Mira has retained her Indian citizenship for several decades and has never become an American citizen; she lives as an “expatriate” or “exile.” Mukherjee, on the other hand, has become a naturalized American citizen and embraced the clothing and cultural practices of America, reveling in being an American. Mukherjee states on Mira’s resistance to assimilation, “My sister is an expatriate, professionally generous and creative, socially courteous and gracious, and that’s as far as her Americanization can go. She is here to maintain an identity, not to transform it” (273). Despite their similarities, they differ significantly regarding their experiences of immigration. Mukherjee’s willingness to accept her immigrant identity at the expense of her Indian identity gives her a sense of completeness. She embraces her expatriate identity. Her multicultural and cosmopolitan view constructs the immigrant experience for millions in the United States. Her allegiance to Americanness makes her immigration experience convenient at the expense of the “trauma of self-transformation,” which she argues is the price she has paid for assimilation. In contrast, Mira’s affinity to her Indian identity makes her feel like an exile in a society where she has spent almost half her life. Mukherjee shows us why Mrs. Sen is more like Mira, who fails to assimilate with the new environment. At the same time, the narrator in “The Third and Final Continent” is perhaps more open to assimilation, like Mukherjee.

In Lahiri’s “The Third and Final Continent,” the narrator’s liminality allows him to assimilate into the host culture and develop a cosmopolitan view of his life. Despite being from Kolkata, where most people live a linear life, he finds his host country conducive to thriving: “We are American citizens now” (197). He feels secure as an American because of his financial stability, which he did not have from his father’s premature death. His new identity allows him a guaranteed life that he wants to ensure for his

family. Moreover, living in America is not leaving his identity of Bengali-ness: “Mala no longer drapes the end of her sari over her head, or weeps at night for her parents, but occasionally she weeps for our son. So we drive to Cambridge to visit him, or bring him home for a weekend, so that he can eat rice with us with his hands, and speak in Bengali, things we sometimes worry he will no longer do after we die” (197). The narrator and Mala are still in touch with their Bengali identity and want their son to nurture their cultural etiquette at home. Mala no longer feels homesick over time. They bring their son back home on weekends. In the family setting, they replicate their Bengali cultural life. They use their bare hands while eating their meal. This approach to the narrator’s indentured cultural identity has a space in their diasporic lives. Still, the narrator and his family balance the integration of both cultures. In this post-colonial era, the world is like a global village where each country connects with another, and people are familiar with heterogeneous aspects. The narrator’s family shows a propensity for maintaining allegiances with both cultures. The narrator’s integration with the host culture from a global view makes him fit in a multicultural society, repressing the dominance of culturally-rooted memories of home.

The memory of home haunts Mrs. Sen and distorts the mental construct of her diasporic home in Rhode Island. When she remembers everything about Kolkata, she talks in a nostalgic tone. She cannot reconcile her mind that she stays so far from her Kolkata life. After reading the aerogram from Kolkata, she knows that her sister has a new baby girl. This news makes her happy and nostalgic. Mrs. Sen tells Eliot, “When I was your age I was without knowing that one day I would be so far” (123). She has yet to decide that she has to live thousands of miles away from her family and relatives. She longs to return to that life. She listens to a recorded cassette that she plays. The process of remembering recurs because it seems like she listens to the recorded voices of her family members frequently. When her grandfather speaks on the tape, she stops the recorder. Mrs. Sen becomes nostalgic, though she does not say anything. She learns that her grandfather is no more. She can realize that their family and relatives back in Kolkata mourn this death and follow rituals. She knows that she is not part of all these rituals. She has already processed that migration has taken away everything from her life.

Mrs. Sen's immigration challenges her indentured identity as a Bengali because of her identity to find fresh fish and the types of fish found in Kolkata. In her desperate search for fresh fish, she complicates immigrant life. Fish is an integral part of Bengali food culture and eating habits. A cliché used widely to refer to the Bengali food habit across the globe is "fish and rice are what makes a Bengali." This idiom implies how these people depend on fish to nourish their appetites and identity. Krishnendu Ray mentions, "Perhaps a Bengali would not be a Bengali without consuming rice and fish [...] As dinner has come to be the most important home-cooked meal, Bengali Americans feel compelled to partake of ingredients (and cooking techniques) that anchor their Bengaliness—steamed rice and fish *jhol*" (56). Bengalis thrive, irrespective of their background, on consuming rice and fish. As numerous rivers supply freshwater fish, and rice grows profusely throughout the region, the availability of fish and rice has made the people of the Bengal region primarily dependent on these food items. Being a Bengali herself, Lahiri knows that Bengali households depend primarily on preparing fish curries. Mrs. Sen knows it is impossible to find proper fish to cook her meal. One day while serving Eliot's mother "a tuna croquette," Mrs. Sen mentions that this item is best if "made with a fish called bhetki" (123). The unavailability of fish manifests the challenges in her diasporic life. She is dissatisfied with the new life because she has grown up "eating fish twice a day" (123). She has developed the habit of routinely eating fish in her daily meal. In the fish market in Kolkata, she used to have various types of fish. Ray elaborates, "Fish links the Bengali to his ancestral land, the landscape of ponds, lakes, and rivers, with its profusion of deltaic waterways" (155). Ray has indicated that for the diasporic Bengali community, eating fish in their daily meals reminds them of their homes. If they fail to manage their culture-specific food in their diasporic lives, they feel disoriented, and their identity shatters. Her difficulty finding fresh fish to cook her meal is living a life sacrificing her culture. Chandrima Karmakar argues that Mrs. Sen's diasporic life centers on one food item, like fish, which makes her happy. Karmakar also indicates that the unavailability makes Mrs. Sen sad because missing this item is missing her home and her family (82-3). Mrs. Sen's preference for fish demonstrates how the Bengali people's food habits depend on this particular item. Preparing the Bengali dishes like fish and vegetables reduces the gap as food has become

the “third space,” as Shweta Garg and Rajyashree Khushu-Lahiri mention, between Kolkata and Rhode Island (74-5). Garg and Khushu-Lahiri argue that cooking a meal is exhausting though Mrs. Sen enjoys this tedious job because she feels nostalgic through this repetitive task (79). Mrs. Sen’s nuanced identity represents the challenges the Bengali diaspora encounters after migration.

In addition, Mrs. Sen chooses not to refer to the apartment as a home because her feeling of unhomeliness defines her diasporic identity. She develops a conflicting binary between her identities as a Bengali and an immigrant. Koshy asserts that Mrs. Sen’s complexity in acculturation challenges the “hegemonic” view of cosmopolitanism that the diasporic people might encounter (599). By portraying a character like Mrs. Sen, the story’s treatment of the “host-guest” (Koshy 599) trope investigates the “minority cosmopolitanism” (Koshy 599) that Mrs. Sen’s diasporic citizenship reflects. As Mrs. Sen refuses to feel at home in her apartment, her psychological detachment creates a distance that manifests in her social communications. When the fish seller asks Mrs. Sen if she has cats at “home,” following her request of leaving fish heads on, she replies: “No cats. Only a husband” (127). It seems Mrs. Sen plays with her words. Maybe she wants to mean that Mr. Sen likes eating the fish head. It is worth mentioning here that the fish head is a preferred element of the fish curry, a typical Bengali dish, and Ray claims that Bengalis prefer the fish head, which “makes the Bengali so bright” on the simple logic that if “you eat brains, you get brains” (156). Though Mrs. Sen sounds ambiguous here, she does not say the word “home” in her reply. She withdraws her ownership in referring to her husband as she removes the possessive adjective “my,” which might be because of her unaffectionate feeling with the apartment. There is no evidence that Mr. and Mrs. Sen do not have a happy marital life. Her disassociation is only with her apartment, which has created an enormous distance from her home in Kolkata.

The narrator in “The Third and Final Continent” makes his host country home because he has no fond memories of home. He considers his apartment a “home” that emotionally associates himself with that place. The calling of his apartment “home” helps him create his cosmopolitan identity as a perfect immigrant who loves his diasporic life. He barely remembers his Kolkata life as he partially loses his indentured identity through migration. He has no fond memory of home. After his father’s death, his



mother “refused to adjust to life” (187). His mother’s insanity, following his father’s death, brings misery to the narrator’s life. The narrator notes: “What pained me most was to see her so unguarded, to hear her burp after meals or expel gas in front of company without the slightest embarrassment” (187). The narrator’s brother takes a job in a jute mill to maintain the family, and the narrator continues his study. From his traumatic experiences of his Kolkata life, his immigration gives him a sense of relief. Immigration renders him an identity to reconstruct his disorderly world, putting everything in order in his new setting.

After moving to Rhode Island, Mrs. Sen replicates things associated with a typical Bengali household in her diasporic life, even though she encounters challenges because of her difficulty finding fresh fish, her inability to drive, and her isolation. Mrs. Sen’s memory of home denies her immigrant life. The distance between these two locations affects her current life and creates tension. Back home, Mrs. Sen claims, “everything is there,” meaning her Kolkata life allows her everything she expects from her life. In conversation with Eliot’s mother, Mrs. Sen mentions how her Kolkata life was nearly full of everything. When Eliot’s mother is concerned about Mrs. Sen’s driving ability, Mrs. Sen says they have a “driver” back home. Mrs. Sen’s knowledge of English is not at a satisfactory level. At least, she does not know that Americans use the word “chauffeur” to refer to a person who is in service to drive a car. Eliot’s mother wants it to be confirmed that Mrs. Sen means a chauffeur. Mrs. Sen does not understand the word’s meaning until Mr. Sen nods reassuringly. It also matters that this is a French word and might not be used commonly in Kolkata. Mrs. Sen’s inability shows how out of place she is in America, where even her command of English is sometimes inadequate due to her vernacular. Even Indian English has been established as a dialect. Because of the advantage of having a driver, she wants to mean she has no driving training—her inability to drive shows that she has lost everything in her life. Her inability to drive might be interpreted more narrowly as symbolic of her lack of agency in her new country. Being unable to drive puts her on the level of a child in America and makes her dependent on others for essential mobility. This inability needs to be considered because American society is quite individualistic, which prepares its citizens to be self-reliant, and in this setting, Mrs. Sen seems unfit.

The biggest challenge for the diaspora is handling their everyday work rather than dealing with their homesickness. Mrs. Sen's present life contrasts sharply with her Kolkata life, which has been carefree and gives a sense of completeness. Nevertheless, her life is stressful as she has to manage the household almost single-handedly. Also, her life lacks the necessary social activities that her Kolkata life used to have. Perceiving the deprivation from social life, Mrs. Sen says: "Everyone, this people, too much in their world" (121). The fragmented way she says this perhaps indicates her state of mind in the story. Her life is shattered because of the isolation. She has no one with whom to spend her time gossiping and acclimating to the new setting when Mr. Sen goes to the university to teach his class. Her family in Kolkata assumes that her American life allows her all comforts though they are unaware that the situation in her place is quite contrary. Her exasperation with their demand to receive pictures of her life in America is evident here:

"Send pictures,' they write. 'Send pictures of your new life.' What picture can I send?" She sat, exhausted, on the edge of the bed, where there was now barely room for her. "They think I live the life of a queen, Eliot." She looked around the blank walls of the room. "They think I press buttons and the house is clean. They think I live in a palace." (125)

Mrs. Sen complains about her present life, expressing her discontentment, for her family members have no idea how miserable she feels in her diaspora life. They have no idea how dissatisfied she is with her current set-up of "house," as she calls it. Her family imagines that she lives in a "palace" to show the contrast between their image of her life as an immigrant and the reality of her inability to feel at home in the apartment. As she complains about everything, she explodes in exasperation. Her outburst expresses her helplessness because of her inability to return home or alter her life.

Mrs. Sen's challenges to adjust to her diasporic life intensify because of her realization that her immigrant life never allows her to mitigate the loss she perceives in her everyday life. Her aversion to her diasporic life intensifies from her realization that her current life creates distance from her Kolkata life. She is not entirely complaining about her diasporic life, as two things in her present situation give her a sense of home. One is that the arrival of mail from Kolkata makes her happy. The letter brings the news

of her niece's birth. Reading the letter on so many occasions, Mrs. Sen sighs as she misses her family though she looks excited about that news. Though Mrs. Sen regrets that she does not see her niece, her maternal affection is reflected in her treatment of Eliot. After reading the letter, Mrs. Sen tells Eliot, "Her own aunt will be a stranger. If we sit side by side on a train she will not know my face" (122). Then Mrs. Sen places her hand on Eliot's head to feel the warmth of love by this touch, which partially assuages her unreciprocated affection for her niece. As her diasporic life deprives her of the company of near ones in Kolkata, she develops a repulsion to her diasporic life, daily complicating her existence.

Mrs. Sen's experience of a diasporic home generates tension in her life. Back home, her life is easy because she can manage everything easily. For Mrs. Sen, the distance between these locations is an "affective condition," as Mani has identified, because she considers that this distance creates a boundary between the homes in two different places. This distance is geographical and personal, as her current life takes away all familiar faces from her and makes her feel like a stranger. Despite Mrs. Sen's attempts to feel at home through her continued cultural practices, she ultimately fails to acculturate herself with the host culture. She replicates an etiquette that people in India hold as practice. When Eliot enters Mrs. Sen's apartment, he removes his shoes and keeps them on the bookcase. Removing shoes in the doorway is a common practice back in India: "Eliot learned to remove his sneakers first thing in Mrs. Sen's doorway, and to place them on the bookcase next to a row of Mrs. Sen's slippers, each a different color, with soles as flat as cardboard and a ring of leather to hold her big toe" (114). Moreover, while entering a temple or shrine where the Vedic deities get placed for daily worship, people leave their shoes outside the building compound to show respect and maintain sanctity. Removing one's shoes is a common cultural practice across the Subcontinent to preserve the sanctity and cleanliness of a place. Mrs. Sen's apartment retains that practice. By emulating this practice, she tries to transform her apartment into a place that gives her a homely feeling and an association with her new setting.

Despite Mrs. Sen's challenges in finding comfort in her diasporic setting, she tries to make her apartment a place of love and care through her caring nature, like a mother. When Mrs. Sen sits on the floor to chop vegetables, she carefully handles the blade because of Eliot's presence in the house. Eliot

enjoys watching Mrs. Sen chop cauliflowers, cabbages, or butternut squash in shapes like cubes and slices, with the blade carried from India to use in the living room for her kitchen work. Mrs. Sen is vigilant to Eliot's movements while chopping:

“Just sit, sit please, it will take just two more minutes,” she said, pointing to the sofa, which was draped at all times with a green and black bedcover printed with rows of elephants bearing palanquins on their backs. (“Mrs. Sen's” 115)

Mrs. Sen asks Eliot to bring something from the kitchen if she does not want to leave the place unprotected when she cuts the vegetables, so she becomes cautious: “Careful, oh dear, be careful” (115). This image of motherly caution is iconic in Indian culture. Mrs. Sen cares for Eliot's safety and becomes extra cautious in dealing with that sharp object while chopping. She chops vegetables, not noticing the blade, while she is also at risk of cutting her fingers but is vigilant to Eliot so that he does not leave the sofa where he sits to avoid danger. Her sense of protection makes her apartment a place of love and care. That protection and care develop a silent mother-son relationship between them, and at least for Mrs. Sen, she loves Eliot's company in her lonely life. Perhaps she tries to create something like a family with Eliot in the same way she is trying to create something like a home in her apartment. Her motherly affection for Eliot develops a bonding beyond kinship. It builds a sense of community and atmosphere of home, transforming an unhomey situation congenial to live and thrive.

Mrs. Sen's inability to drive makes her diasporic life motionless. She learns to drive a car, thinking that the skill will give her sedentary life some mobility. She can travel to some places in the city. She knows she cannot return to Kolkata; that thought of geographical distance is at the center of her agony. The excerpt below is part of a conversation between Mrs. Sen and Eliot that manifests Mrs. Sen's longing for home:

“Mr. Sen says that once I receive my license, everything will improve. What do you think, Eliot? Will things improve?”

“You could go places,” Eliot suggested. “You could go anywhere.”

“Could I drive all the way to Calcutta? How long would that take, Eliot? Ten thousand miles, at fifty miles per hour?” (“Mrs. Sen’s” 119)

She asks the question rhetorically to emphasize that she cannot go “anywhere,” as Eliot says. She cannot go to the place where she wants to go. Even her driving permit will not make it practically possible for her to return to her home in Kolkata.

Losing Eliot’s company means losing everything in Mrs. Sen’s life because her attachment to Eliot is more than that. The automobile accident results in her losing her companionship with Eliot. In her attempt to drive, she crashes her car, and following this incident, she loses contact with Eliot. Eliot’s company is the only connection she has developed in her life in America. After the accident, “the damage was slight” (134), but the mental wound Mrs. Sen has to bear following this incident is much heavier than anything she endures. Eliot is her companion in her lonely life. Losing Eliot is unbearable for Mrs. Sen. When Mr. Sen and Eliot’s mother settle the reimbursement, Eliot goes to the bathroom and hears Mrs. Sen crying. That afternoon is the last meeting between Mrs. Sen and Eliot. Driving home, Eliot’s mother confesses that she feels relieved though losing him is painful for Mrs. Sen. As their companionship ends, this loss shows why Mrs. Sen cannot develop bonding with her new country. Mrs. Sen’s attempts to make her apartment “home” fail. Her failure to negotiate her diasporic reality indicates that her acculturation is impossible. Concomitantly, her success in assimilation with the host culture challenges her indentured identity as a Bengali.

“The Third and Final Continent” recounts the story of the narrator successfully creating a new “home” as an immigrant. The protagonist is an educated professional seeking a career away from his home country. Though the narrator’s marital life is new, the understanding between the narrator and Mala seems deep and reflective: “Like me, Mala had traveled far from home, not knowing where she was going, or what she would find, for no reason other than to be my wife” (195). Mala’s journey starts with uncertainty despite the narrator having a stable job. She does not know anybody in Boston. She moves there like the narrator to create her new identity. The narrator thinks their mutual understanding transforms their diasporic country into their homeland. He also considers that their unification makes

things easier for them in a country where they are new. As a first-generation immigrant, Mala's diasporic life exposes her to many unfamiliar things. Like the narrator, Mala encounters many new cross-cultural issues, but they successfully acculturate them in the new place. The narrator reflects: "When I told her stories about my mother, she wept" (196). This instance of accompanying each other at the time of emotional outbreaks makes them friends with each other. Their intimacy helps them create a new home together because knowing each other is as thrilling as exploring their new country. Mala's presence in his diasporic life helps him feel at home, accelerating his acculturation process. Mala's visiting Mrs. Croft is significant because Mrs. Croft's judgment of Mala boosts his confidence. Being "perfect" in Mrs. Croft's eyes seems to him that Mala might assimilate into the host culture. The narrator wants Mala to be acceptable in Mrs. Croft's eyes. The narrator and Mala remember Mrs. Croft after her death. The narrator's inclination to this domestication process makes his migration easy because of his leniency toward his indentured identity. He successfully creates a new home in America due to the growth of intimacy in his relationship with his wife, which ultimately results in their having a son together. In contrast, Mrs. Sen lacks intimacy with her husband and eventually loses Eliot, who was a sort of surrogate son for her. The contrast between the narrator's and Mrs. Sen's memories of home are also quite sharp, with the narrator revealing painful memories of death and dementia in his small family in Kolkata. In contrast, Mrs. Sen's memories depict a large, loving circle of family and community she left behind. In her case, the lack of intimacy between Mrs. Sen and her husband contrasts nicely with the narrator and Mala.

First-generation immigrants encounter all challenges in their immigrant lives to establish an identity for future generations. The narrator in "The Third and Final Continent" remembers his early days of immigration, knowing that he has paved a path for his son to go beyond the limit and become ambitious. His nostalgic recollections help him realize that every step he has made as an immigrant is a landmark because he knows how challenging it is for someone like him to settle in a city like Boston. His father's premature death has left them destitute. Following the death, the family faces severe financial hardship. He establishes his life as a successful immigrant from that financial ruin, guaranteeing a secure

life. For the narrator, it is logical that he calls his host country “home” because calling America home is a hard-earned identity he wishes to pass on to the next generation. In his son’s eyes, he sees the same ambition he had as a young man from India that encouraged him to sail across the ocean. As a first-generation immigrant, the narrator encounters all challenges of immigration. While driving through Massachusetts Avenue, he says, “[...] I slow down and point to Mrs. Croft’s street, saying to my son, here was my first home in America” (197). The narrator expresses his experience as a first-generation immigrant to his son. As an ambitious young man, he starts his immigrant journey to the unknown and accommodates himself comfortably in the diasporic setting he now calls his “home.”

The narrator’s journey as an immigrant is full of hardship because of the unforeseen challenges immigrants encounter in their diasporic homelands. In immigrant life, every step made is a milestone reached. The narrator’s journey from Kolkata to Boston is equally impressive as the journey the US astronauts made to reach the moon’s surface. The narrator considers his migration in the context of the astronauts’ journey to the moon. Both journeys have similar aspects as the narrator and the astronauts face challenges in the new land they have never encountered. They have adjusted to the new environment.

While the astronauts, heroes forever, spent mere hours on the moon, I have remained in this new world for nearly thirty years. I know that my achievement is quite ordinary. I am not the only man to seek his fortune far from home, and certainly I am not the first. Still, there are times I am bewildered by each mile I have traveled, each meal I have eaten, each person I have known, each room in which I have slept. As ordinary as it all appears, there are times when it is beyond my imagination. (“The Third and Final Continent” 198)

The narrator’s achievement holds higher value at least for one reason: he has spent much more time than the astronauts on the new land. He considers every movement a landmark for him. Suppose the astronauts’ short stay on the moon’s surface establishes their ownership. In that case, the narrator’s living in the United States establishes his right to be a legal resident as an American citizen. As an inspirational figure for future immigrants, his successful immigration is an instance of the “model minority” (Ranasinha 182). Lahiri’s immigrant characters, Ranasinha observes, “conform to the model of successful

citizenship that is comfortable and easily embraced by the majority group” (182). As a first-generation immigrant, he knows his challenges to fit in different socio-cultural and economic situations, negotiating with cross-cultural issues at each step of his immigrant life.

Lahiri’s migration narratives present multidimensional aspects of immigrant life, though a common notion about immigration is that immigrants live better lives with financial and professional success. These achievements are at the expense of sacrificing their cultural and family lives in their homeland. As noticed in Mrs. Sen’s situation, she epitomizes a failed migration because her life represents the thorny aspects of immigrant life. Her cultural consciousness challenges her life away from home. She feels nostalgic for everything back home as she cannot return to her family even after her grandfather’s death. Moreover, her unhabituated approach to American life’s mobility, which depends mainly on one’s ability to drive, makes her life static. She feels unhomely as she cannot cook Bengali dishes. Her life is disorderly because she has lost everything after immigration. In contrast, the narrator and Mala are uninterested in returning to their ancestral home, as they establish themselves as immigrants successfully.



## CHAPTER 3

## HISTORICAL MEMORY

“In March, Dacca had been invaded, torched, and shelled by the Pakistani army. Teachers were dragged onto streets and shot, women dragged into barracks and raped.” (“When Mr. Pirzada Came to Dine” 23)

Diasporic subjects build a sense of community not only through their cultural elements like food and language but also through their shared recollections of political trauma. As Lahiri’s characters in “When Mr. Pirzada Came to Dine” and “A Real Durwan” encounter complexities because of the transformative experiences of memory and identity, their memory forms based on the Subcontinent’s historical events that influence their diasporic lives. This chapter examines how the characters participate in memory formation during Bangladesh’s Liberation War in “When Mr. Pirzada Came to Dine.” Lilia, as the narrator, remembers this event many years later. Partition has an overarching impact on Boori Ma’s life, as she cannot forget her past in “A Real Durwan.” In contrast, Lilia’s mother tends to forget Partition, as refusing to remember this event brings them the comfort of not recalling atrocities though they participate in constructing memories of another historical event, Bangladesh’s Liberation War. These political events challenge Lahiri’s characters because the Subcontinent’s political upheavals often expose its people to turbulent situations and violent activities. Partition brings the traumatic memory of riots, displacement of people, and casualties of millions on both sides of the border. The memory of these events plays a central literary theme in her stories. Her immigrant characters encounter challenges from recollections of these events in their everyday lives. The connection between the Subcontinent’s people and its political events explores the impact of time on the narrative constructs of memory that affects diasporic subjects in their spatiotemporal situations.

The diasporic characters in “When Mr. Pirzada Came to Dine” and “A Real Durwan” recollect the historical events of Partition and Bangladesh’s Liberation War by recounting their pasts. “When Mr. Pirzada Came to Dine” is arranged into two segments. The first part demonstrates how the narrator’s parents remember Partition with mixed feelings when they are thousands of miles away from their

homeland. The latter part of the story is the recollection of Bangladesh's Liberation War by Lilia, who recounts the narrative of the war and recalls their guest, Mr. Pirzada. He is a Bangladeshi scholar on his sabbatical leave in America. The story illustrates how Lilia's parents consider Partition in their diasporic reality. It also projects how Lilia witnesses Mr. Pirzada and her parents psychologically participating in Bangladesh's Liberation War. The story shows the process of recollection as Lilia remembers Bangladesh's Liberation War many years after this incident. In "A Real Durwan," Boori Ma virtually lives in her past, eliminating the boundary between her present and past situations. She fails to accept her current position after Partition as a refugee and remembers her life back home quite frequently, referring to that life in her everyday interactions.

"Historical memory" refers to the collective memory of political events, like the Partition of India or the Independence of Bangladesh following the Liberation War. The Subcontinent's people remember these political events, which have influenced them individually and collectively in different phases of their lives. For instance, Partition victims in Lahiri's stories remember the event with much fear even many years later. Historical memory constructs a common understanding of historical incidents that a group remembers collectively. They can relate to historical incidents they participate in or witness and remember them many years after their occurrences. Lilia's parents remember Partition with mixed feelings, whereas Boori Ma's building community almost disapproves of Boori Ma's victimization from Partition and speaks of it with blithe concern. This community no longer remembers Partition and remains unconcerned about Boori Ma's refugee life and her suffering. Maybe they are indifferent to Boori Ma's narrative because this incident moves nobody across generations in West Bengal. For Boori Ma, this incident always remains alive in her memory and present because she constantly relives it. Her recollection of this incident is complicated as she only talks about her miseries due to Partition. Her neighbors' aloofness manifests that Partition-related trauma and loss are her agonies. In contrast, Lilia's parents participate in Mr. Pirzada's worries, empathizing with him in this crisis, almost following every detail of the ongoing war. They worry about Mr. Pirzada's family in Bangladesh when the Pakistani

military starts mass killing. All these participatory actions include them in a community that constructs their memory.

Memories of historical events contribute to the narrative constructs in both stories. The story “When Mr. Pirzada Came to Dine” incorporates a first-person narrative. Lilia remembers her past, which brings back her memory of the war and Mr. Pirzada’s visit to their house during that tumultuous situation in the Subcontinent. In contrast, the story of Boori Ma’s victimization during Partition is a third-person narrative. The narrative looks into Partition’s incidents from a secondary perspective but critically depicts Boori Ma’s woes and miseries, perceived as ramifications of Partition. The differences in narrative techniques are significant because the first-person narrative demonstrates the construction of historical memory and how the narrator’s involvement with the incident permeates authenticity throughout the story. The third-person narrative perspective shows exclusion from the story because this perspective segregates the narrator and the characters. The characters remain aloof, whereas the first-person narrative demonstrates an active engagement.

Lahiri’s stories use Partition as a significant literary trope in molding the narratives. Partition has an all-engulfing effect on the Subcontinent’s people because it is associated with the issues of the displacement of homes and unjustified demarcation. Partition victims cannot forget Partition-related trauma because of widespread violence, memories of homes, and migration. One direct consequence Partition victims experienced was migration, which was massive and uncontrolled in terms of its influences on individuals and collectives. The Subcontinent’s people migrated on both sides of the newly formed countries after Partition. As new demarcation lines divided people and included them in identity politics, millions migrated to assume their new identities based on their religion. Hindus and Sikhs moved to India from Pakistan, and Muslims migrated to Pakistan. This massive human migration gave a huge population a refugee identity. Still, the refugee crisis remains alive. Joya Chatterji claims that the lack of initiatives in rehabilitation results in the homelessness situation of the Bengali refugees (Chatterji 1000). As Koshy coins “endo-diasporas” in her argument about the different identities of diasporic people, this analysis has found that Partition significantly influenced the influx of people as millions migrated on both

sides of the border, making them diasporic. Partha S. Ghosh has also observed that the Subcontinent's turbulent socio-political and economic situations have compelled millions of people to migrate to many places in search of jobs or to build new homes in new homelands. In "A Real Durwan," Boori Ma is not only the central figure of the narrative, but her homelessness bestows upon her the status of an eternal refugee. She differs from other diasporic people because she does not find a permanent place to live. Her narrative of sufferings after migration becomes central in the story as the refugee crisis after Partition is yet to be resolved, which Lahiri considers a necessary issue to address in her work.

Lahiri's characters participate in major historical incidents of the Subcontinent and recall them at different phases of their lives. For Lilia's parents and Mr. Pirzada, the shared memories seem to bring them together despite the fact that they are from different countries. In opposition, Boori Ma's incessant recalling of her life before Partition seems to estrange her from the inhabitants of her building due to their preoccupations with more quotidian concerns. Also, Lilia looks back on Bangladesh's Liberation War in the story. As they cannot evade the interventions of these incidents in all spheres of their lives, they actively participate and reminisce about them and bear the consequences of these events directly or indirectly, like Lilia's parents and Boori Ma. In their diasporic life, Lilia's parents remember the political turmoil with mixed feelings—her father recalls these events as a process of knowing the Subcontinent's history. Her mother refuses to do so because the tragic incidents during Partition bring her discomfort. In contrast, Boori Ma's lamentation of her loss is constant, and she grieves as she tries to recollect her Partition memory.

Partition has divided the Subcontinent's population into sectional identities and engaged them in identity politics. This division of religious groups, Muslims in one section and Hindus with other religious minorities in the other has jeopardized their coexistence. In the story, Lilia's father is concerned about educating Lilia about the Subcontinent's political issues following Partition. This political event divided Hindus and Muslims into two sections, and these groups turned antagonistic. Lilia's father teaches her about this hostile relationship back home because one group mistrusts the other. Lilia's father urges her to learn about the Subcontinent's geography, history, and politics. Despite their ethnic similarity, Lilia's

father indicates how Mr. Pirzada's identity is nuanced because the distinction lies in their political identities redefined by the Subcontinent's history and politics. After Partition, the Subcontinent's politics became intricate as its people participated in identity politics and practiced parochial views to achieve their vested interests. Hindus and Muslims stood antagonistic against each other during this political upheaval. Lilia's father questions Lilia's notion of Mr. Pirzada's identity of "Indianness." Her father thinks Mr. Pirzada is not an Indian from their experiences of Partition. He adds, "Not since Partition. Our country was divided. 1947" (25). From that experience, Hindus and Muslims are part of sectarian violence and communal politics. Though Partition included them in identity politics, dividing them into two sections, their cultural and ethnic identity is one in this story: they are Bengali.

Lilia's father wants to educate Lilia about their differences with Mr. Pirzada in their nationalities, as they belong to two nations—India and Pakistan knowing they are culturally and ethnically homogenous. Lilia's father guides her to a world map to show how the border between India and Pakistan separates them politically. The confusion in understanding Mr. Pirzada's identity is due to their shared cultural background versus the traumatic incident of Partition. Mr. Pirzada's different national identity is perhaps insignificant to Lilia's parents because many Partition victims recall this historical phenomenon with grief and anger. Lilia's father educates her about the Subcontinent's history though it is complicated because of political events like Partition. He informs her that Mr. Pirzada and their identities differ from their separation following Partition. The dialogue below clarifies Lilia and her father's understanding of their relationship with their guest: "Hindus here, Muslims there. Dacca no longer belongs to us. He told me that during Partition Hindus and Muslims had set fire to each other's homes. For many, the idea of eating in the other's company was still unthinkable" (25). The atrocities during Partition made Hindus and Muslims stand against each other. This hostility has a transgenerational and communal effect on the people of both religious communities across borders. In school, Lilia learns nothing about the Subcontinent and its political narratives. Following Partition, two major religious groups divided themselves into two sections and practiced sectarianism in every initiative they considered at personal, national, or international levels. Both communities have forgotten to enjoy a healthy social life by

practicing communalism. Though Lilia is not subject to that parochial social view and identity politics back in their ancestral home, her father makes her aware that they have a bloody history of following sectarianism and communal hatred back home. Despite being aware of all this separatism, Lilia wonders how they differ from Mr. Pirzada as they have everything in common.

Though both Hindus and Muslims cannot think of living peacefully in each other's company from their experiences of Partition, in Lilia's house, they achieve harmonious coexistence. They have overcome the animosity both religious communities practice back in their homelands. These Bengali exodiasporas prioritize their cultural homogeneity over their religious, political, and national differences: "Mr. Pirzada and my parents spoke the same language, laughed at the same jokes, looked more or less the same. They ate pickled mangoes with their meals, ate rice every night for supper with their hands" (25). Despite their political differences, Lilia's parents share a friendship with Mr. Pirzada through the tangible ties of language and food. Besides their bonding over shared collective trauma from the Subcontinent's political incidents, especially from Bangladesh's Liberation War, sharing language and food is another facet of diasporic community formation. As an adult, her father knows of their political differences with Mr. Pirzada. At the same time, Lilia is only concerned about the cultural similarities from her childlike perspective and her focus on tangible things such as food and language, and this difference does not make any sense to her.

Diasporic people develop a sense of community through sharing their native cultural elements that make their bond strong and keep them united as a community or cultural unit in the diasporic land. Lahiri's Bengali diasporic characters develop this sense of community through their shared experience of food and hospitality. Lilia's Bengali parents are hospitable to their guest, Mr. Pirzada, and he enjoys the Bengali dishes that Lilia's mother cooks. To Bengali people, cooking is about more than just nutrition; it is equivalent to nurturing their culture. Krishnendu Ray points out how the process of cooking food, using spices, and making specific dishes contribute to the embodiment of "Bengaliness": "Bengalis have loaded the process of cooking and eating with meanings about 'meals,' kinship, family, and communion" (47). Bengali people connect and build a sense of community through their repetitive actions of cooking and

sharing food. As Lilia's mother makes typical Bengali dishes, she looks for proper ingredients. She complains about not having mustard oil in the supermarket. Lilia's parents also complain about why neighbors do not visit them without an invitation, which might have been a common practice that Lilia's parents experienced back in Kolkata. Lilia mentions that they are always searching for "compatriots" by checking the directory of the university. Also, her mother always cooks delicious Bengali dishes: "lentils with fried onions, green beans with coconut, fish cooked with raisins in yogurt sauce" (30). Mr. Pirzada appreciates her cooking and enjoys his sabbatical leave in a warm environment fostered by Lilia's parents. As Lilia's mother forms a sense of community by preparing and sharing Bengali dishes with Mr. Pirzada, her food ritual revolves around her repetitive cooking actions. They have achieved a community through their food ritual in the United States that would not be possible back home after Partition. The action of food preparation and consumption, according to Garg and Khushu-Lahiri, "placates the nostalgia for the Edenic homeland" and stimulates "another wave of nostalgia at the diasporic platter's difference from the original, unadulterated gastronomic experience" (77). These scholars further explain that cooking and consuming food makes the diaspora homesick. At least for Mr. Pirzada, looking at his pocket watch, set to the local time in Dhaka, reminds him of his family in Bangladesh. Mr. Pirzada might try to understand what his daughters are doing at that hour when he is having his meal. Her mother's preparation of food makes Mr. Pirzada nostalgic. Thus, her cooking bears testimony to their community formation through their shared experience, which is significant for them to uphold their Bengali identity.

Lilia's mother does not want to remember Partition because the memory is traumatic though remembering this political event is simultaneously painful and inevitable as it has constructed the collective memory. Her denial of remembering this event can give her comfort, but it cannot undo everything and erase the psychological scars of the victims. Lilia's mother thinks Lilia has no connection with that traumatic past. She does not want Lilia to know about the atrocities during Partition. Though her mother does not want Lilia to know the Subcontinent's history and politics, she gets familiarized with some of the peculiar facts of its history and geography. Lilia realizes that these two parts— East and West Pakistan— are "separated by an expanse of Indian territory" (26). Her father asks indignantly, "Do you

study history? Geography?” (26). Maybe Lilia’s father thinks that Lilia should know the history of her country. She should know where her country exists on the planet. As a first-generation immigrant, her father cannot forget his roots, and he guides his daughter to be aware of her ancestral home. Her mother thinks Lilia does not need to know anything about the Subcontinent as her American life offers a secure life with all opportunities: “In her estimation, I knew, I was assured a safe life, an easy life, a fine education, every opportunity. I would never have to eat rationed food, or obey curfews, or watch riots from my rooftop, or hide neighbors in water tanks to prevent them from being shot, as she and my father had” (26-7). Her mother retorts that Lilia is guaranteed everything in America and is not part of the nasty aspects of life back in India. Her mother shares a single reflective observation of her life that might resonate with the voices of millions with the same reflections. Her mother is concerned about the hardship Lilia would have faced if she had been in India. She also does not expect Lilia to know everything about Partition. She asks her husband, “How can you possibly expect her to know about Partition?” (27). Her mother thinks Lilia is not mature enough to participate in a conversation related to Partition and the Subcontinent’s politics, which per se is complicated. She wants the conversation to end right away because of the traumatic consequences of Partition.

Partition is alive in Boori Ma’s memory, as this event makes her a perpetual refugee. Boori Ma encounters challenges that the refugees face in their lives, but her situation is extreme here because the building community shows a lack of concern for her cause. She lacks negotiation skills, and her life ends up in mendicancy. Before Partition, she had everything back home, and the story illustrates her situation in East Pakistan. As part of her “durwan” duty, Boori Ma sweeps the stairwell twice daily. Durwan refers to people in charge of gatekeeping and caretaking the property. Boori Ma’s occupation exemplifies how she remains a subaltern voice throughout the story. Her liminality as a Partition subject also reflects society’s notion about her as the community categorically excludes her as a voice of the Partition narrative. Boori Ma mentions that the political “turmoil” separated her from her family. In East Bengal, they had a “two-story brick house” (71). She had affluence back home: “a rosewood *almari*, and a number of coffer boxes whose skeleton keys she still wore, along with her life savings, tied to the free end of her sari” (71). As



she left home empty-handed after Partition, this political incident made her a beggar like many other victims. She migrated to Kolkata, crossing the border with many other refugees “on the back of a truck, between sacks of hemp” (72). Joya Chatterji contends that Hindus and Muslims were involved in violent activities in both parts of the East and West Bengals and Bihar (Chatterji 997). Though the refugee crisis escalated after Partition violence, the West Bengal government has never paid attention to rehabilitating these refugees (Chatterji 1000-2). Chatterji has pointed out the local government’s strategic failure in dealing with refugees in West Bengal. The number of Hindus who migrated from East Bengal to the West is higher as West Bengal received more refugees than East Bengal. Thus, Boori Ma’s inability to find shelter is a collective failure.

Boori Ma’s audience is suspicious of her narratives because the post-Partition generations whom Boori Ma talks about in everyday interactions cannot relate to her stories of home and migration. The remembrances of her leaving home and crossing the border bind her in pain and nostalgia. Her description of her home in East Bengal and migration to Kolkata make her narrative questionable to her audience because she cannot remember all incidents during Partition chronologically. Perhaps, her comparison between pre-and post-Partition situations is sometimes irrelevant. When she gives the details of her crossing the border of East Bengal, it does not reflect her financial affluence in her home. In the story, Mr. Dalal questions, “What kind of landowner ended up sweeping stairs?” (72). It makes no sense to Mr. Dalal how someone with a rich financial background can do this menial job of sweeping and cleaning. Mr. Dalal cannot believe that someone who had affluence and lived the life of a landowner back home lives a destitute life. The building community’s inability to understand her situation and the trauma she had gone through complicates the situation. As Boori Ma talks about Partition, she represents the Partition victims in general and specific cases like one of hers. The community she encounters in Kolkata is from different generations who did not experience this political event. Even if she meets any bystanders, they may not have had a similar experience. The post-Partition generations’ failure to relate Boori Ma’s migration after Partition is understandable. Perhaps, they think that all Partition victims have almost similar stories, and she is not an exception. However, Partition memories haunt Boori Ma because of her

experiences of losing her home and cross-border migration. They may think that she delivers her stories of home and migration to draw sympathy from her audience. As a result, when she refers to her home back in East Pakistan, her listeners cannot connect because the wealth she had back home contradicts her current status.

Boori Ma reminisces about her past and cannot forget her life in East Bengal before migration though she sometimes talks boastfully, which might make her a liar to her audience. While talking about her past, Boori Ma pauses to counterbalance with sighs. She had the lifestyle of a wealthy household: “Mustard prawns were steamed in banana leaves. Not a delicacy was spared. Not that this was an extravagance for us. At our house, we ate goat twice a week. We had a pond on our property, full of fish” (71). The richness Boori Ma narrates sounds unrealistic because of her present beggar-like situation. She remembers the frightful departure from her home, saying she came to Kolkata with “two bracelets” in her hands; this means that what she has now does not reflect the richness they had back home. She follows, “Yet there was a day when my feet touched nothing but marble” (71). Her description of affluence signifies the reason for her agony as a refugee, deprived of shelter, let alone her intriguing narrative of luxuries that she enjoyed once. Her audience is suspicious about her life back home; they think she might have worked as domestic help in the house of a well-off “zamindar” (73). She may speak about her life in an exaggerated tone from that experience. Throughout the story, Boori Ma indicates her richness with her remorseful tone of nostalgic past. She relates that the clothes they used to wear back home were “muslin” (74). This reference to the finest clothes makes her listeners think that Boori Ma presents a concocted migration story and is making things up to seek their attention. She used scented water with “petals and attars” (79) for bathing. Boori Ma’s memory haunts her, tormenting her as she struggles to fight the dehumanized poverty in her refugee life.

Boori Ma’s building community cannot deny their responsibility toward her for her service to them as a caretaker and for her affection for them like a mother. This “tight” community is less interested in her past (Koshy 600). They show no concern about anything related to Partition. Perhaps, they are more concerned with the drama of their present lives. They want to be historically blind. Only Mr.

Chatterjee shows his concern about what happens around him. It is unclear if he empathizes with Boori Ma, but his tone is sympathetic to her. He has not opened a “newspaper since Independence” (72). It is discernible that newspapers present the bare fact of post-Partition repercussions that Partition victims experience. Perhaps he does not read a newspaper to avoid exposure to this harsh reality, which is unbearable for Mr. Chatterjee. Also, his reluctance is because he might not like the plethora of news covering Partition victims and violence. Despite that, he is a close observer, especially of what happens in Boori Ma’s life, and “his opinions were highly esteemed” (72). Boori Ma’s other neighbors are apathetic to her. Their disapproval is due to their lack of knowledge about historical incidents like Partition that cause lifelong suffering for someone like Boori Ma. Her lifelong attempt seems insufficient to adjust to her loss. She does not find a sympathizer except Mrs. Dalal, whereas the rest of the community remains ignorant of her suffering. Their behavior is apathetic to her cause, and they are thoughtless of her future. Nor do they assess her situation and consider where she will find asylum. It seems that Partition has brought eternal miseries into her life, making her a lifetime refugee—an eternal diasporic subject. In addition, though Boori Ma appears to be a social outcast, she is the epitome of a mother figure who protects the community with her service as a building caretaker. Her surveillance is like a mother who takes care of her children and saves them from all potential threats and perils. She assures them of a sense of safety. It is also noticeable here that the second part of her name, “Ma,” which means mother, denotes that she is a mother figure to the building community. Like a mother, she cares for them. She epitomizes their adoptive mother, assuring them of a sense of security.

Boori Ma’s building community gainsays her accounts of Partition victimization and chooses not to remember Partition, but Lilia’s parents join Mr. Pirzada in constructing their collective memory of Bangladesh’s Liberation War. The difference in the process of recollections between the two stories matters because Lilia tells the story as her lived experience, whereas Boori Ma’s tone is lamenting throughout the narrative. Lilia engages herself in the war with her family and remembers this incident. Lilia tells the story as her memory is associated with Mr. Pirzada and the war. During the war, Mr. Pirzada’s frequent visits to Lilia’s house contribute to forming Lilia’s memory. Lilia’s parents and Mr.

Pirzada worry about Bangladesh's freedom and the safety of Mr. Pirzada's family. These concerns have become inseparable. Bangladesh's fight for liberty challenges Mr. Pirzada's psychological situation and makes the narrator's family concerned about Mr. Pirzada's family and their safety in a war-torn country. The Pakistani army's atrocities stretched toward innocent civilians like teachers and women. They killed teachers in numbers and assaulted women in barracks. The genocide launched by the military has taken millions of Bangladeshis' lives, horrifying the world with the brutal actions they unleashed upon unarmed and innocent civilians. At this challenging time, Lilia's home is ideal for developing friendships between the guest and her parents in this transnational cultural reality because her parents not only support Mr. Pirzada psychologically but also entertain him with food. Brian Yothers points out that eating food together and forgetting their differences is ritualistic. Mr. Pirzada enjoys the Bengali dishes Lilia's mother cooks, and their friendship is not confined to food rituals. From that closeness with Mr. Pirzada, Lilia's accounts of Bangladesh's Liberation War sound authentic and reliable. Her detail-oriented narrative is like the document of a historian who recorded everything about this devastating incident.

Lilia becomes a representative voice for Mr. Pirzada and her parents, who have experienced the extremity of the war and constructed their memory. As a child member of the family, Lilia witnesses what happens in their psychological world during the war when the Pakistan army's barbarity spreads to every corner. Her experiential knowledge becomes a reliable source to get a holistic picture of Bangladesh's Liberation War because Lilia knows everything about it with her childlike innocence, and her family and Mr. Pirzada follow this political incident with seriousness. She chooses almost every detail of the war to depict that comes to her by hearing her parents and Mr. Pirzada and watching news reports. As Lilia watches the news, she describes:

“On the screen I saw tanks rolling through dusty streets, and fallen buildings, and forests of unfamiliar trees into which East Pakistani refugees had fled, seeking safety over the Indian border. I saw boats with fan-shaped sails floating on wide coffee-colored rivers, a barricaded university, newspaper offices burnt to the ground. I turned to look at Mr. Pirzada; the images flashed in miniature across his eyes. As he watched he had an immovable expression on his face,

composed but alert, as if someone were giving him direction to an unknown destination.” (“When Mr. Pirzada Came to Dine” 31)

This detail expresses Lilia’s anxiety from witnessing the atrocities spread across Bangladesh. Here, the repetition of “I” in three consecutive sentences manifests Lilia’s psychological involvement with this phenomenon by asserting her involvement with every incident around her. Lilia is not a distant observer. Instead, she is involved passively in this war as she witnessed her parents and Mr. Pirzada. Lilia learns almost everything about the war and the inhumane destruction everywhere in Bangladesh. She notices Mr. Pirzada’s stern face, and his anxiety for his family is evident. Lilia’s recounting of this political event as she observes her parents and Mr. Pirzada’s psychological involvement with this incident makes her an authentic voice.

Lilia’s prayer for Mr. Pirzada and his family’s well-being signifies her sincere concern for them despite the fact that she lacks knowledge of Hindu rituals. She prays for Mr. Pirzada’s family with the chocolate she received from Halloween. Her prayer wishes for Mr. Pirzada to overcome their crisis moment during the war. Lilia can remember when adults worry about everything during the war; she prays. Lilia only anticipates that her prayer will bring good to Mr. Pirzada’s life and fulfill his wishes. Lilia has never prayed and does not know the Hindu praying rituals for someone’s well-being. She does it for Mr. Pirzada in her way. From her childlike understanding, this chocolate is like an offering to God that Hindu devotees follow in rituals. After her prayer, this chocolate transforms into “prasad.” Lilia thinks eating this chocolate after her prayer may make her wishes come true. After eating the chocolate, Lilia does not brush her teeth for fear of rinsing out her prayer and goes to bed with a sugary mouth. She wants to keep that sweetness for long hours, believing that this ritual may bring good to Mr. Pirzada. Lilia mentions, “I put the chocolate in my mouth, letting it soften until the last possible moment, and then as I chewed it slowly, I prayed that Mr. Pirzada’s family was safe and sound. I had never prayed for anything before, had never been taught or told to, but I decided, given the circumstances, that it was something I should do” (32). Her childlike innocence in dealing with such a crisis makes her perspective clear to her audience. She wants to alleviate Mr. Pirzada’s worries, giving him mental comfort. Asha Sen asserts that

Lilia does something similar to having “prasad,” which the Hindu priests offer to the gods during worship and serve the offerings among the devotees after the ritual. During this challenging time, Lilia’s mother cooks “hardboiled eggs and white rice for dinner” (65). This simple cooking contrasts with the food that her mother usually cooks. Lilia’s parents understand Mr. Pirzada’s agony and worries, and her mother’s cooking of simple food is something as plain as the prasad. During the war, they show more concern about knowing what is happening in Bangladesh than preparing food. Also, Lilia’s prayer for Mr. Pirzada’s family becomes a part of her realization. From a fearful apprehension of washing out her good wish, Lilia decides not to brush her teeth after dinner. Lilia also reads Mr. Pirzada’s mental state. She thinks that when she enjoys one of the candies Mr. Pirzada gives her, she swallows Mr. Pirzada’s fear.

Mr. Pirzada’s friendship with Lilia’s parents is emblematic of Bangladesh’s alliance with India during the war. The Pakistani junta government segregated Dhaka from the rest of the world and tried to conceal its homicidal activities by censoring the press and media. The world gradually learned about their fanatic killing actions and arson attacks: “More poets were executed, more villages set ablaze” (34). Tension escalates, and the situation deteriorates further everywhere in Bangladesh. If the refugee crisis goes unchanged and the world does not come forward to improve the refugee crisis, India will be going to “war against Pakistan” (36). In Lilia’s home, the humanitarian crisis in Bangladesh becomes their sole concern. They become so engrossed in the development of this historical incident that they become part of that history. Lilia narrates:

“I remember some nights helping my mother spread a sheet and blankets on the couch so that Mr. Pirzada could sleep there, and high-pitched voices hollering in the middle of the night when my parents called our relatives in Calcutta to learn more details about the situation. Most of all I remember the three of them operating during that time as if they were a single person, sharing a single meal, a single body, a single silence, and a single fear.” (“When Mr. Pirzada Came to Dine” 41)

Lilia’s parents and Mr. Pirzada are like one spirit. They focus on the ongoing war, forgetting almost any other things in their lives. They solely desire Bangladesh’s freedom from the Pakistani regime. As their

wishes are the same, they behave like one unit. Their unity epitomizes true friendship in the diasporic land and their homelands, where Bangladeshi freedom fighters and Indian soldiers fight against their enemy for Bangladesh's freedom.

Lilia realizes that her experience with Mr. Pirzada has become a memory that her family and Mr. Pirzada have collectively engaged in creating, a historical memory based on Bangladesh's War of Liberation. Lilia's family celebrates Bangladesh's victory, but Lilia laments the separation from Mr. Pirzada as he returns to his country after completing his study in America. Mr. Pirzada also meets his family in an independent nation. Until Lilia's parents receive a letter from Mr. Pirzada, Lilia studies the map on her father's desk. She imagines Mr. Pirzada in his traditional attire, looking for his family in Dhaka. At their dinner, when they toast their water glasses in celebration, Lilia feels Mr. Pirzada's absence in their house for the first time: "I knew what it meant to miss someone who was so many miles and hours away, just as he had missed his wife and daughters for so many months" (42). Lilia remembers Mr. Pirzada in her present life as he is still alive in her memory. He has no reason to return, and Lilia feels the emptiness that Mr. Pirzada used to feel for his family back home. Like a family member, she recollects everything related to Mr. Pirzada and understands what it means to miss someone. She knows what it means to lose someone and grimly reflects that Mr. Pirzada never returns as a guest.

Lahiri's stories are an elaborate rendering of the diasporic people's recollections of their past associated with the historical events in the Subcontinent. Lahiri's characters cannot evade the influences of political incidents that occurred at different phases of time because they live with the memory of their home, culture, and history. Lilia and Boori Ma remember these political events many years after occurrences. In both stories, they recollect these historical events either individually or collectively. Lilia's parents and Boori Ma remember Partition, and Mr. Pirzada, though he does not reflect on the Partition event, actively participates in another significant historical event, Bangladesh's Liberation War. Mr. Pirzada says nothing about Partition, recalling his memory of Partition. He chooses not to share anything about this incident because he knows that once he begins talking about the woes and sufferings of Partition victims, that will bring much discomfort in his diasporic life. Perhaps, Partition has not

affected his life as it has severely affected others. The ongoing war in Bangladesh might have partially overshadowed his Partition memory.



## CHAPTER 4

## CONCLUSION

Lahiri's diasporic characters give the microcosmic and differentiated image of Bengali immigrant lives in the diasporic landscape, even though they have many things in common regarding food, language, and history. They remember their family and relatives in their homeland, as we noticed in Mr. Pirzada, Boori Ma, and Mrs. Sen's situations. The study has extensively represented nuanced aspects of the Bengali exo-diasporas, besides shedding critical focus on Boori Ma to illustrate the aspect of her marginality related to endo-diasporic nuances. Though migration leaves endless issues to adjust due to the diaspora's memories of home, the immigrant characters form collective negotiations, reconcile varied identities, and grow cosmopolitan in Lahiri's narratives.

Lahiri's title story from *Unaccustomed Earth* unearths the issue of intergenerational conflict by vividly depicting two representative characters from two generations— Ruma and her unnamed father. Ruma's hesitation in dealing with her father warmly demonstrates tension in this father-daughter relationship. The lack of warmth this relationship projects looks uncommon. This father-daughter relationship functions less effectively, perhaps from the mother's death. Regarding this unfamiliarity, Koshy notes that in Lahiri's work, "transnational domesticity forms an unusually recessive domain because its defensive constitution as a bulwark of cultural continuity and filiality screens it from outside scrutiny and hardens it against internal challenges" (353). As this transnationality contradicts the diaspora's nuanced Bengali identity, second-generation immigrants are more concerned about their multicultural identity. Lahiri's "radical intervention" (Koshy 353) guides the reader to reshuffle their conventional notion of a Bengali household and understand the situation in immigrant families, which is multicultural. The multicultural reality of Lahiri's characters demonstrates that diasporic generations can reduce the elements of conflict only if both generations understand generation-specific conduct and decipher their nuanced lives.

Second-generation immigrants negotiate their indentured identity, developing a psychophysical distance from their ancestral homes and culture. Despite the first-generation immigrants having encountered challenges from their diasporic setting in the early years of their immigration, they have to reconcile with the second-generation and resolve conflicts for harmonious coexistence. Lahiri's "Unaccustomed Earth" does not name Ruma's father, implying that the first generation's role or presence in the house is not as essential as the next generation's. Lahiri's nameless male characters demonstrate the first generation's successful immigration, such as Lilia's father ("When Mr. Pirzada Came to Dine"), the narrator ("The Third and Final Continent"), Ruma's father ("Unaccustomed Earth"), and Hema's father ("Once in a Lifetime"). This namelessness signifies the first generation's sacrifice for their offspring to ensure a comfortable and secure life. In settling into the new culture, these people negotiate their native identity, and their identity becomes fluid. The second generation feels more connected to their diasporic homeland than their ancestral homelands in the Subcontinent. Romi and Ruma have less connection to their parent's home country: "The older his children grew, the less they wanted to go" ("Unaccustomed Earth" 8), though, for most first-generation Bengali immigrants, Kolkata remains alive in their memories all time, and for the place is their ancestral home, they always want to return there. These second-generation immigrants lack connections to their parent's home culture. Even in cooking a simple Bengali dish like "begunis," Ruma fails to do it perfectly and feels sorry for her failure: "Sorry the begunis broke apart" ("Unaccustomed Earth" 23). This dish is prepared from eggplants, slicing them into pieces, mixing essential condiments like turmeric and chili powder, and frying them in oil. This item is a popular starter dish. This tiny aspect of Bengali nuance implies that second-generation immigrants enact domesticity differently from their parent's indentured identity. In the second generation's custody, the Bengali cultural identity encounters challenges and is subject to extinction.

Lacking the skill of using Bengali convincingly is the reality in Lahiri's case. Regarding Lahiri's intimacy with the languages: Bengali, which she speaks with her parents and relatives back in Kolkata, and English, which she uses in her academic and literary endeavors, Lahiri says in a conversation with the BBC journalist Razia Iqbal, "I have no pure connection to any language," for she lacks the advanced

reading and writing skills in Bengali like the native users and she does not speak English with her parents and other relatives with whom she feels emotionally attached. In the story, Ruma's inability to utilize her Bengali hints at Lahiri's confessional remarks on her [Lahiri's] lack of adeptness in using her mother tongue.

In "Unaccustomed Earth," the second-generation immigrants demonstrate conflicts with their indentured identity using their parents' native language. They frequently code-switch when they speak. As a child, Ruma faced her mother, who was very strict about Ruma's speaking of Bengali in the domestic environment. Lahiri's second-generation immigrants prefer English over Bengali. For example, Ruma speaks Bengali occasionally when her uncle or aunt calls from Kolkata during festivals. Ruma's knowledge of Bengali has never been satisfactory, as she does not speak with an adult's fluency: "She tripped over words, mangled tenses" (12). Her occasional use of Bengali results in this transcultural peculiarity and maladroitness in using Bengali in everyday communication. For second-generation immigrants, this deviation is refracted even through exploring Lahiri's biographical details. Ruma's relationship with Bengali and English languages mirrors Lahiri's lived experiences. Due to their social and academic purposes, English has taken the position of Bengali for these diasporic people. The second generation might speak Bengali, but their language competency in their parent's mother tongue remains at the nascent or beginner stage. Ruma and Adam's son is Akash, who encounters challenges when situations demand him to speak Bengali. Ruma treats Akash more leniently, allowing him to go for his natural language selection. Akash's speaking English over Bengali is pertinent because Adam speaks English, and Ruma's Bengali is not at the stage of guiding him thoroughly:

"By now Akash had forgotten the little Bengali Ruma had taught him when he was little. After he started speaking in full sentences, English had taken over, and she lacked the discipline to stick to Bengali. Besides, it was one thing to coo at him in Bengali, to point to this or that and tell him the corresponding words." (12)

His acquisition of Bengali is at the word level and ceases to develop once he starts acquiring English at the sentence level. Over generations, the association with one's ancestral home and culture loosens by

sacrificing one of the significant components like the language of their parent's indentured culture.

Distancing from Bengali is enacted even more profoundly by Akash. This lack of skill shows the deterioration of the next generation's integrity with their ancestral homeland and its culture, illustrated through the portrayal of Ruma and Akash's characters.

In addition, though the relationship between generations changes over time, Ruma's aging father still wishes to nurture his daughter. This father-daughter relationship is feeble. The delphinium plants in Ruma's backyard symbolize their feeble relationship. The story challenges the relationship between two generations that need nurturing and caring for a healthy relationship that permeates generation after generation. These withering plants need care and water regularly to bring them back to life. Ruma's father notices the plants through the kitchen window. He says, "Your delphiniums need watering" (16). Her father's observation shows how the elderly generation cares for everything in the house, even trivial things in the garden. This cultivating habit in Ruma's father is similar to helping a tender thing grow mature, toiling in "unfriendly soil" (16). This unfriendly nature of the place reminds the reader of the story's title and epigraph. Hawthorne mentions that the "worn-out soil" fails to render the fertility needed to develop "human nature." For the next generation, parents' guidance and experience are mandatory. Her father's caring tendency manifests in his offer to help Ruma invigorate the feeble plants by watering them when he says, "Let me water your delphiniums" (16). For him, caring for these plants is equal to caring for his daughter. Maybe, his gardening indirectly demonstrates what parental guidance is and how this caring should be. In his retired life, he can return to Kolkata and lead the rest of his life amidst Bengali culture. He stays in his diasporic homeland and chooses not to go back. Perhaps, he wants to see Ruma and Akash thrive in America.

In contrast, Hema balances out her life between her Bengali and diasporic identities under the guidance of her mother in "Once in a Lifetime." Lahiri's stories place mothers at the center of the house because of their contributions to their children's lives. Hema's mother, Shibani, is a central figure who is active and nurtures everyone. Her tendency to care for everyone transforms their house into a place like a temple, where Shibani is a deity. One of the other names of the goddess Parvati is Shibani, also worshiped

as Annapurna. The word “Annapurna” is the combination of “Anna,” meaning food or grains, and “Purna,” meaning “filled to the fullest.” This goddess of food and nourishment never leaves her devotees unfed. Shibani epitomizes an ideal host who treats her guests generously. Her hospitality is rooted in the Subcontinent’s cultural and religious practices. The most uttered guiding principle for the Subcontinent’s people from the religious scriptures, for example, “Atithi Devo Bhava,” means that “the guest is akin to God.” Serving one’s guests is serving God. Shibani chooses not to forget her cultural values and religious practices in her diasporic life though this family shows affinity with their cosmopolitan identity. She cares for everyone in the house, including their guests. Kaushik and his parents, Dr. Chaudhuri and Parul visit Cambridge after many years. Both families were close and connected before Kaushik’s family moved to India. They have flown almost “halfway across the world” and had enough food on their flight: “Champagne, chocolates, even caviar” (233). Even after having food, Parul is tempted to enjoy Shibani’s food and says, “But I saved room. I remembered your cooking, Shibani” (233). Parul’s commentary on Shibani’s cooking validates her [Shibani] expertise in cooking. Hema’s house is the epitome of that practice, and she mentions: “My mother, in a cheerful mood that evening, decided to cook a big pot of khichuri” (247). She cooks a “big pot” instead of a regular pot to nourish everyone in the house. This “big pot” refers to the image of the goddess Annapurna holding the pot in her hand and the ladle in the other. The goddess serves the food with a spoon to feed as many unfed as possible. Shibani’s generosity extends toward the end of the story when Hema recounts, “My mother brought food over so that your mother would not have to cook, not realizing what a favor this was” (251). In Bengali Hindu culture, mothers are often called “Annapurna” for their role in the kitchen: cooking delicious food and feeding the family. As long as family members eat well, everything goes in order. Like the deity, Shibani is the central figure in the family who renders food to all members for their nourishment.

Lahiri’s diasporic characters struggle to reconcile with their immigrant lives. They are susceptible to mental breakdowns and feel isolated. Lahiri’s characters, like Mr. Pirzada, Boori Ma, and Mrs. Sen, are alienated from their family and relatives. They involve themselves in alleviating their unhappy situation by building a sense of community. Though Mr. Pirzada succeeds, Boori Ma and Mrs. Sen fail to build

companionship in their diasporic lives. Mr. Pirzada's checking the time with his pocket watch shows how he perceives alienation. In addition, Lilia's parents complain that neighbors do not drop by. Back home, neighbors visit each other without an invitation. In the diaspora, these people fail to establish connectivity with their community people, and this distance seems always to be maintained. Moreover, Boori Ma's lonesome survival as a refugee in a hostile environment unleashes inexorable miseries in her life. In Mrs. Sen's case, migration complicates her life and makes her lonely. Her exclusion from her home country is disproportionate to her inclusion in the host country because of her perceived psychological distance from her diasporic self.

Lahiri's stories foreground the theme of alienation, disclosing various issues of the diaspora's nuanced lives. Diaspora's alienated life is pervasive in her later stories, which carry this theme even with more nuances of transcultural identities. In "Unaccustomed Earth," Adam's prolonged absence makes Ruma and Akash lonely. Adam's withdrawal from home for this extended period reminds the diaspora of their absence from their homelands. He remains absent throughout the story, and his presence is only over the phone with Ruma. Adam's absence is similar to the diasporic people's remoteness with their family, with whom they connect over the phone. Though Ruma's father's visit gives them a sense of reconciliation, this seems to be a transitional stage. Adam's absence also denotes that this family challenges conventional views of family construction because everyone is on mobility in Western countries. Ruma's house replicates modern households, where family members are career-oriented and can move anywhere, prioritizing professional engagements.

In conclusion, the study reiterates that Lahiri's migration narratives reflect the Bengali diaspora's dilemmas in their immigrant lives in a broad spectrum regarding their indentured identity. These people retain their cultural life from their experiences at home but in distinct ways, as the perception parameter varies from person to person. Lahiri's characters, such as Mrs. Sen and Boori Ma, encounter challenges in their diasporic homeland because of their consciousness of identity and memory of home. Mrs. Sen cannot settle her mind in Rhode Island and becomes nostalgic about her family and life in Kolkata. Boori Ma's memory of home torments her present life in Kolkata, as she becomes separated from her family

and lives a refugee life. Her marginalization sequesters her from the rest of the community. Partition victims like Boori Ma, who live away from their homelands due to political upheavals, remain as eternal refugees in their diasporic land. In addition, Mr. Pirzada's temporary immigration has nuanced aspects due to the ongoing war in Bangladesh and his worries for his family. These different categories of diasporic situations make Lahiri's migration narratives intricate. Nevertheless, Lilia and Hema's parents live the cultural life of the Bengali diaspora, mingling with people of other cultural and ethnic identities like the narrator in "The Third and Final Continent." Their diasporic realities merge with their cosmopolitan identities. Though Lilia and Hema, as second-generation immigrants, maintain a symbiotic relationship between their native identities and diasporic existences, Ruma creates a distance from her native culture. Lahiri's migration narratives have illustrated the diasporization process of Bengali immigrants in the United States. This study has shown how Lahiri writes the United States as a mixing ground of people of various cultures and ethnicities. Going forward, we can consider Lahiri's other works through the lens of socio-cultural and literary criticism to understand how Lahiri's stories connect with other migration narratives of South Asian and African writers and diaspora literature across genres.

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