

HELSINGIN YLIOPISTO

Model Migrants in Turmoil:

Second-generation Migrant Identities in Jhumpa
Lahiri's *Unaccustomed Earth*

Nana Arjopalo
Pro Gradu Thesis
English Philology
Department of Modern Languages
University of Helsinki
April 2015

Contents

1	Introduction.....	1
1.1	Aims	1
1.2	About Jhumpa Lahiri.....	1
1.3	An Overview of <i>Unaccustomed Earth</i>	3
2	Literature Review	7
2.1	Neoliberal Family Matters.....	7
2.2	Diaspora Representation and Interpretation of Postcolonial Loss	12
2.3	Family and Gender Dynamics	20
2.4	Conclusions	25
3	Second-generation Transnational Identities.....	26
3.1	Diaspora Identities.....	26
3.2	Women as Transmitters of Culture.....	29
4	Dutiful Daughters; Lost Sons	35
4.1	The Cultural Hybrid	36
4.2	The Translator	44
4.3	The Validation Seeker	47
4.4	The Diasporic Peter Pan	50
5	Conclusions.....	58
	Bibliography.....	62

1 Introduction

1.1 Aims

My research explores the formation and negotiation of second-generation migrant characters' cultural identities in Jhumpa Lahiri's collection of short stories *Unaccustomed Earth*. The main characters in the stories are the offspring of parents who have migrated from Bengal, India, to the United States after the 1965 Immigration Act, which favoured skilled professionals. The characters are depicted as children of well-off parents, with access to good schools and Ivy League colleges, expected by their parents to hold on to Indian traditions while succeeding professionally in the "new" society. The stories in *Unaccustomed Earth* demonstrate that meeting these parental expectations and forming a multicultural identity is no easy feat. Lahiri appears to suggest that only partial success is possible, and even that comes at a price to pay. Post-colonial theorists propose that cultural identities of second-generation migrants are negotiated rather than set, and Lahiri's depiction of these "hyphenated subjects" appears to comply with this finding.

The main focus of my study is to explore why some characters in *Unaccustomed Earth* appear to succeed in their lives and "home in" better than others, how gender affects this process, what other factors may be involved, and what kind of coping strategies characters employ to overcome their displacement. Drawing from cultural studies in addition to literary theory, I argue that in *Unaccustomed Earth*, second-generation migrant women are depicted as more apt in negotiating their identities, and can be interpreted as more "successful" than the men. I suggest that the reasons for this are likely to be culture-dependent.

1.2 About Jhumpa Lahiri

Jhumpa Lahiri belongs to a group of contemporary American writers who are widely read internationally by both mainstream and minority audiences. Her literary works focus on the experiences of Bengali immigrants and their descendants in contemporary New England, but at the same time address universal themes and

appeal to wide audiences. She won the Pulitzer in 2000 for her first published collection of short stories *Interpreter of Maladies*, and her first novel, *The Namesake* (2003), has been filmed by Mira Nair.

Jhumpa Lahiri was born to Indian parents in London in 1967, and moved to the United States at the age of two. She was originally named Nilanjana Sudeshna Lahiri, but began using her pet name Jhumpa on the request of her kindergarten teacher, as it was easier for teachers and class mates to pronounce. Her father worked as a librarian at the University of Rhode Island, and her mother was a teacher. Lahiri's family maintained close connections to relatives and friends in India, and she grew up in a bi-cultural atmosphere of well-educated, middle-class immigrants. Jhumpa Lahiri received a B.A. in English Literature from Barnard College, and continued her studies at Boston University. She has an M.A. in English, an M.F.A. in Creative Writing, an M.A. in Comparative Literature, and a Ph.D. in Renaissance Studies. Lahiri has taught creative writing at Boston University and the Rhode Island School of Design. She is married to a Greek-Guatemalan-American journalist, and lives in Italy with him and their two children. Her published fictional works so far are *Interpreter of Maladies* (1999), *The Namesake* (2003), *Unaccustomed Earth* (2008) and *The Lowland* (2013).

There is some controversy among critics and literary scholars on how to classify Jhumpa Lahiri. Is she “a Bengali writer? An Indian writer? An Asian-American writer? A postcolonial writer? An American writer? A global writer?” (Dhingra and Cheung 2012: 13). It is also fair to ask about the validity of this naming, and to consider to what extent academic categories and labels benefit our understanding of her writing. The editors of *Naming Jhumpa Lahiri: Canons and Controversies*, Lavina Dhingra and Fleud Cheung, argue that naming the canon or canons to which Lahiri's writing belongs, “can affect how various audiences read them, and how often and in which contexts she is being (or can be) taught and interpreted” (14). In spite of the difficulties in categorizing Lahiri's writing, her work bears the burden of ethnic representation. Though her writing has been acclaimed for its literary qualities, the reception of her portrayal of the Bengali diaspora has been contradictory. Lahiri has been simultaneously praised for her realistic portrayal of an ethnic minority and criticized for exoticizing her characters. Lahiri resists simple

categorization also in that her focus is on the individual; she is not a political writer. Because of her background, some critics expect her to engage with the politics of race and cultural identity in her writing; this is an expectation Lahiri usually chooses not to meet, or deals with on a more subtle level. Ambreen Hai suggests in her essay “Re-rooting Families: the Alter/Natal as the Central Dynamic of Jhumpa Lahiri’s *Unaccustomed Earth*” that Lahiri’s stories do not carry a radical or transformative political edge, but “they do articulate, with poise, delicacy and sensitivity, the multiple and different problems of rerooting/rerouting from one family to another, from one culture to another, the difficulties of simultaneously retaining and forming communities” (Dhingra and Cheung: 209). In appealing to new immigrants as well as those that are supposedly at home, and stirring empathy for “difference under the guise of sameness, Lahiri’s writing builds a (trans) national community” (209). This, Hai suggests, may be its greatest contribution and cultural value (206).

In an interview in *The Independent* in 2008, Lahiri discusses the then recently published *Unaccustomed Earth*: “I write about people whose very existence has been shaped by unsettlement. My upbringing and my sister's upbringing were almost hydroponic because our roots had nowhere to cling.” Due to her feelings of displacement Lahiri does not consider her childhood as having been particularly happy. She explains that her experiences differed from her parents’ because they “had originally come from a land somewhere, firm ground. The fact that they lived away from it was a source of pain and unhappiness and frustration, but there was a land they thought of as home. Until recently I thought that there was no place, no land that I could go to and say I'm home.” Nowadays, she does consider the United States her home, and explains the change by “having my own children and just having lived in America for 38 years. When I go back to New England now I do feel a sense of return. It was where I was raised.”

1.3 An Overview of *Unaccustomed Earth*

Unaccustomed Earth was published in 2008, after the Pulitzer-winning *Interpreter of Maladies* and widely popular *The Namesake*. The collection consists of eight short stories, of which the last three have the same main characters and form a novella. All

of the stories are focalized from the perspective of second-generation migrant characters, except for the title story, which includes sections narrated from Ruma's father's point of view. The story cycle operates like a prism, with every story echoing another, and offering alterations on the same themes. In addition, characters are often juxtaposed within the stories – for example brothers and sisters, mothers and daughters, or fathers and sons. Jhumpa Lahiri favours the omniscient narrator in *Unaccustomed Earth*, with only three stories, “Hell-Heaven”, “Once in a Lifetime” and “Year's End” using first-person narration. The use of first-person narration in these stories creates an immediate intimacy between the reader and the narrator, and ensures that the reader's sympathy lies with the “right” character.

Temporal shifts are a common trope in Lahiri's writing, and are used extensively in this collection of short stories. They not only advance the plot, show the effect that time has on characters' lives, but also highlight “the motifs of return, loss and death that will recur throughout the short story cycle” (Munos 3). The constant presence of the past suggests that individuals cannot exist to their full potential in the present without first achieving closure with past events.

The title story, “Unaccustomed Earth”, is a portrayal of three generations of Indians in the United States. The story spans the visit of Ruma's recently retired and widowed father to Ruma's new home in Seattle, where she lives with her American husband and three-year-old son Akash. She has given up her legal career to stay at home with Akash and is expecting another baby. The story dives into old family issues and explores both father and daughter's culture-related sense of duty; Ruma feels obliged to ask her father to move in with her family, and her father feels pressured to accept, against his better judgment. Akash has a chance to bond with his grandfather properly for the first time during the visit, and Ruma, who still mourns her mother, discovers at the end of the story that her father not only continues to wish living on his own, but also has a new partner.

“Hell-Heaven” explores the universal themes of love and jealousy, and the difficult relationship between a mother and a daughter. As the story opens, Pranab Chakraborty, a graduate student at MIT, feels homesick and considers returning to Calcutta. On the streets of Boston he meets and befriends Usha and her mother Aparna. Pranab becomes a regular visitor at Usha's house, and Aparna, neglected by

her own husband, falls in love with Pranab. Pranab, however, meets and eventually marries an American woman, Deborah. Aparna disapproves of the marriage, her jealousy affecting her impression of Americans in general, as well as her relationship with Usha. Deborah and Pranab divorce after 20 years of marriage when Pranab falls in love with a married Bengali woman. Aparna and Usha's relationship improves over time, as Aparna begins to accept her situation, gradually settles in and grows more tolerant of American culture. She eventually reveals to Usha how she nearly committed suicide because of her unrequited love for Pranab.

"A Choice of Accommodations" portrays a couple with young children stuck in a low point in their marriage. Amit and Megan take a weekend trip to Amit's old boarding school to attend a wedding. Even though the weekend does not progress according to plans, it allows Amit and Megan to reconnect. At the same time, Amit revisits his school days, attempting to come to terms with his lonely childhood and distant parents.

"Only Goodness" is a story of alcoholism in the family, and the complicated relationship between siblings. Sudha, the first-born of Indian parents, is a classic over-achiever, while Rahul, the parents' favourite, throws his talents away in a struggle to find himself. The story dives into family dynamics, and brutally reveals how addiction affects everyone in the family.

"Nobody's Business" is a light-hearted story on the surface, but has a dark undercurrent. The story is told from the perspective of Paul, a doctoral student, who becomes infatuated with his flatmate, an Indian woman called Sang. The story is an account of Sang's relationship with the philandering Egyptian, Farouk. A humorous addition to the story is brought by the endless string of Indian suitors, recruited by Sang's parents and their acquaintances, who keep calling and asking her out in order to propose.

The "Hema and Kaushik" novella consists of three individual short stories. The first, "Once in a Lifetime", is written as a first-person narration by Hema and addressed to Kaushik, the second, "Year's End", is narrated by Kaushik, and the third part, "Going Ashore", has an omniscient narrator, except for the epilogue-like last section, which is again narrated by Hema and addressed to Kaushik. "Once in a Lifetime"

spans a time in Hema and Kaushik's childhood when Kaushik's family stayed with Hema's after moving back to the United States, following a few years spent in India. The two families used to be close, due to their shared culture and experience of being immigrants in Cambridge. It is clear that they have now drifted apart, but the main reason, Kaushik's mother's terminal cancer, is kept as a family secret for as long as possible, and revealed to the reader only at the end of the story.

"Year's End" describes Kaushik's unsuccessful Christmas holiday at his father's house a few years after his mother's death. Kaushik's father has recently remarried, and in addition to a new stepmother, Chitra, Kaushik has acquired two Indian stepsisters from Chitra's previous marriage. Kaushik's visit culminates in a conflict with the little girls, and leads to him permanently distancing himself from his father's new family and living the life of a nomadic photojournalist.

The last story, "Going Ashore" describes the chance meeting of Hema and Kaushik two decades later in Rome, and the passionate but ill-fated romance they embark upon. Hema has recently ended her long relationship with a married man, and is now about to travel to India to marry Navin, an Indian man she barely knows. Kaushik, weary of traveling, has accepted a job as a photo editor in Hong Kong. In spite of their strong connection, Hema is committed to a life with another man, and after her earlier disappointment in love, cannot bring herself to trust the aloof Kaushik enough to plan a life together with him. Kaushik perishes in the 2004 tsunami in Thailand, while Hema marries Navin as planned. At the end of the story, she mourns Kaushik but looks ahead, pregnant with Navin's baby.

The stories are all quite different, but echo each other in their themes, similar family settings and even similar characters. They all describe people who have "struck their roots into unaccustomed earth" as mentioned in the epigraph of the book. Lahiri's themes are universal, but her characters' personal traits and behaviour are directly influenced by the fact that they belong to the Indian diaspora. *Unaccustomed Earth* undercuts the idea of the internally driven, successful model minority, demonstrating instead that its fictional representatives are not preconditioned to succeed, but are dependent on their own will and ability to make sense of their background and surroundings to build unique cultural identities.

2 Literature Review

In this chapter, my objective is to offer an overview of relevant existing research on migrant identities in *Unaccustomed Earth*, assess the value of this research, and to discuss any gaps that remain. Existing research on *Unaccustomed Earth* mostly consists of reviews, articles and academic journals, and can roughly be divided into two categories: criticism that approaches the text from the perspective of 1) diaspora representation and interpretation of postcolonial loss and 2) family and gender dynamics. For the purpose of clarity, I apply a similar thematic division in my literature review, but as a starting point I will discuss Susan Koshy's essay "Neoliberal Family Matters", which successfully combines both of these approaches.

2.1 Neoliberal Family Matters

In the introduction of "Neoliberal Family Matters" Susan Koshy explores the concept of the Asian model minority and society's current fascination with it. She proposes that its representatives "have become anxious figures of the prized human capital needed to navigate the insecurities and volatility of the global knowledge economy" (2013: 2). Koshy suggests that the recent fascination with the model minority family is connected to the restructuring of the American family during the past decades. The Asian American model minority family has come to be regarded as an exemplary enterprise unit that at least on the outside appears impervious to destabilizing economic and social factors (Koshy 2013: 3). Koshy explains that under a neoliberal governmentality, the responsibility for security, well-being and quality of life of citizens has shifted from the state to the individual (2013: 3). The role of Asian Americans in American society extends beyond successful individuals, as "Asian Americans have not only become exemplary neoliberal subjects defined by flexibility, high human capital, and opportunistic mobility, but the Asian American family has also come to be identified as an intimate form ideally equipped to reproduce human capital" (Koshy 2013: 3). Asian Americans appear to place greater value on career and material success, which is also reflected in their parenting norms. Koshy draws the conclusion that in a time when the United States has lost ground economically to Asian nations and traditional family structures have crumbled, the

model minority family offers a vision of new hope in creating material and human capital (2013: 3). However, this seemingly benign idea of the model minority has not been accepted without some doubt: “At what subjective cost is model minority form reproduced? Who bears the cost of success?” (Koshy 2013: 4). These questions are central in my analysis of *Unaccustomed Earth* as well, since Lahiri’s stories appears to suggest that the cost of success is high for second-generation migrants. The model minority ideal has been criticized as assimilationist, homogenizing and heterosexist, and as a possible cause of psychological damage in minority subjects (Koshy 2013: 4). Koshy points out that “entangled in legacies of racial marginalization, historical silencing, and cultural censorship, discussions of model minority family bonds have only recently begun to be taken up in public discourse and in scholarship. The subject has, however, found early and often encrypted expression in one of the most enduring genres in Asian American literature, the intergenerational narrative, in which inheritance and model minority filiality are articulated as form and thematic” (2013: 4).

In her essay, Koshy applies transnational feminist, queer and materialist critique to study model minority filial ties in the context of the global knowledge economy. She argues that “Asian American skilled immigration and filial relations offer an indispensable lens for understanding the economic reorganization of intimacy under neoliberalism because these bonds are overdetermined by a plethora of social forces that characterize the present: new transnational kinship forms, human capital, and flexible citizenship” (2013: 5). Koshy explains her interest for studying *Unaccustomed Earth* from this perspective by fiction’s ability to provide “a rich archive for understanding the cultural present because it captures the pervasive social unease that erupts from the gap between our experiences and the available vocabulary for them” (2013: 5). She goes on to propose that fiction is a vital source for reading and diagnosing the present, and “less freighted than the memoir by the lures and constraints of publicity, to unpack the subject of neoliberal filial relations” (2013: 5).

Koshy suggests that Jhumpa Lahiri’s *Unaccustomed Earth* retells the “official immigrant family romance of productive citizenship in short stories which probe how the neoliberal logic that infuses economic migration penetrates the emotional

infrastructure of the family, distorting filiality and disrupting belonging” (2013: 6). She observes that the stories shift focus between the lives of the first generation migrants as they attempt to preserve their Indian cultural identity while pursuing economic upward mobility, and their children, who struggle to negotiate high parental expectations to reproduce professional success and maintain cultural continuity even as they deal with being partial outsiders to American culture (2013: 6). Koshy brings forth the idea that in *Unaccustomed Earth*, second-generation migrant characters inherit a legacy of displacement, inhabiting a dispersal they did not initiate and which many of them experience as destabilizing. Koshy further proposes that the experiences of secondary migrants (wives and children) undercut the presumed voluntarism and agency usually associated with economic migration (2013: 7).

Koshy raises the interesting and so far fairly uncommon suggestion that the seeming lack of political content in Lahiri’s writing should not be regarded as a complete absence but more a relocation of the political (2013: 8). This observation allows Koshy to ground her own analysis in a firm historical and material frame, and to study its effects on the family form itself. Koshy points out the lack of previous criticism on the scalar shifts between the domestic and the transnational in Lahiri’s writing, as well as of the effects of neoliberalism’s structural transformations on the inner worlds and domestic lives of her characters. In *Unaccustomed Earth*, Lahiri’s focus has shifted from brief moments and encounters to the backdrop of generational time, and global, historical events (2013: 9). Koshy argues that Lahiri’s collection of stories is a revision of inheritance, a critique of the model minority family as a (re)producer of cultural identity and human capital (2013: 9).

She proposes Lahiri’s intergenerational narratives to be so bleak that they take the form of “the filial gothic”. In coining the term filial gothic, Koshy extends the concept of the marital gothic introduced by Michelle Massé to describe “a genre of fiction in which the women protagonists become insane or kill themselves because their roles as wives or mothers have become unbearable to them” (2013: 10). Koshy suggests that “unlike the marital gothic which centres on feminine subjection, the filial gothic explores the cross-cutting pressures of gender and generation” (2013: 11). Koshy explains that the form depicts the subjection of daughters and sons

equally, and this is often entangled with the subjection of their mothers (2013: 11). According to Koshy, Lahiri's stories demonstrate how "the simultaneous idealization and instrumentalization of filial duty in the model minority family creates intense pressure to succeed on parental terms and creates a schism between the subjective experience of filial coercion and the benevolent image of filial love" (2013: 11). Koshy argues that Lahiri's purpose of repeating the intergenerational narrative in each story signifies an intention to reveal to readers that the family structure itself contributes to the characters' anguish. This is seldom admitted by the characters themselves (2013: 11).

Both Koshy's introduction of the filial gothic, and interpretation of Lahiri's short story cycle as a representative of it, are interesting. My analysis of *Unaccustomed Earth* concurs with many of Koshy's ideas, but I interpret the story cycle's tone as more positive than what Koshy's concept of the filial gothic allows. The gothic implies a kind of horror story, whereas the stories in *Unaccustomed Earth* end in a conflict being resolved, and the endings usually suggest a more positive outcome for all characters. Not every story ends in sadness, and not every secondary immigrant character is tragic. Koshy's interpretation fails to take into account the more successful characters that Lahiri portrays. This omission is what I attempt to include – to find reasons behind the success and failure of various characters.

Koshy suggests that "if parental control over their sons' lives is primarily focused on monitoring professional achievement and is slacker in enforcing sexual discipline, the reverse is true for the daughters" (2013: 12). This is a valid claim that has roots in Indian culture and traditions. In addition, Koshy proposes that the characters' ways to negotiate parental demands in *Unaccustomed Earth* are gender-dependent (2013: 11). As evidence Koshy offers that male characters like Romi, Rahul, Amit and Kaushik are all able to reject parental expectations and leave, whereas the female characters' struggle is long-standing and more painful (2013: 12). I find this to be only partially true, since some of the female characters such as Hema, Ruma, Sudha and Sang do move away from the proximity of their childhood homes and live fairly independent lives. I will discuss this point in more detail in Chapter 4.

Lahiri's stories are rich in stops, stasis, reversals and delays, and seldom follow a linear narrative movement (Koshy 2013: 13). Instead of chronologically charting the

path of a young protagonist towards reconciliation with society, reaching social integration and national identity through marriage or profession, Lahiri's "new immigrant bildung is fractured by conflicts over marital and professional choices and marked by estrangement from national identity and a pervasive sense of individual isolation" (Koshy 2013: 14). Koshy suggests that in *Unaccustomed Earth*, "the trope of development overdetermines individual and family trajectories, but the recurring temporal ironies and affective disturbances that waylay narrative 'progress' – regressions, impasses, diversions – point to the inadequacy and deforming power of these normative models of development" (2013: 14). Koshy proposes that in addition to temporal interruptions, Lahiri applies juxtapositional comparison as a technique to point out the emotional burdens and psychic costs of diasporic maintenance (Koshy 2013: 17). This juxtapositional comparison is indeed present in one form or another in all of the stories – among siblings, friends, mothers and daughters, fathers and sons. Lahiri's stories illustrate the resistance of individual lives to the path planned out by parents; in Koshy's words, "the very practices adopted by the first generation to secure immigrant homes exacerbate feelings of unhomeliness in the second generation and, in a delayed boomerang effect, in immigrant parents confronted late in their lives with broken, fragile, or tenuous ties to their children" (2013: 19). Lahiri's story cycle describes ageing parents that question their choice to migrate in the first place. Koshy suggests that the wayward growth of Lahiri's second-generation characters is a rejection of inheritance perceived as reproduction of human capital or cultural identity, and "a testimony to the emotional violence of such expectations or demands" (2013:20).

In the last section of her essay, Koshy introduces the concept of exorbitant citizenship. By this she refers to "forms of citizenship that are eccentric, erratic, or irregular because they fall outside hegemonic cultural narratives of membership or are denied the full rights of citizens" (2013: 20). Koshy observes that *Unaccustomed Earth* moves immigrant fiction away from the fiction of prospective citizenship toward the fiction of interrupted naturalization. Instead of belonging to a place, Lahiri's characters belong to uprooting (Koshy 2013: 20). Koshy suggests that in focusing on secondary migrants (wives and children) and on the experiences of the second generation, as well as secondariness as an ontological condition, Lahiri emphasizes the "elusiveness of sovereignty in displacement" (2013: 21). Koshy

offers that as Lahiri's stories "reveal the dislocating effects of economic migration, they also offer an ethical rereading of the inheritance of unhomeliness, turning it into the ground of minority cosmopolitanism that, rather than reasserting a claim to identity and place, stresses the partiality of all claims to belonging" (2013:21). Koshy invokes Derrida's idea of inheritance as an imaginative task of interpreting the past instead of a deterministic genetic transmission (2013:22). The story cycle contributes to the emergence of new immigrant identities and brings forth the value of aesthetic knowledge in the information-driven global economy (Koshy 2013:22).

Koshy's essay raises many interesting ideas, and is one of the most relevant articles in regard to my own research topic. Koshy's approach is focused on the economic and political, whereas mine is more anthropological, but "Neoliberal Family Matters" provides a solid base for the issues that I aim to explore. Koshy manages to tie Lahiri's family-focused stories to the economic and political reality we live in, and thereby validate the importance of her research also in a more general, global context.

2.2 Diaspora Representation and Interpretation of Postcolonial Loss

The epigraph for *Unaccustomed Earth* is a quote from American writer Nathaniel Hawthorne's "The Custom-House", the preface to his novel *The Scarlet Letter*, formatted here as it appears in Lahiri's collection of short stories:

Human nature will not flourish, any more than a
potato, if it be planted and replanted, for too long
a series of generations, in the same worn-out soil.
My children have had other birthplaces, and, so far
as their fortunes may be within my control, shall
strike their roots into unaccustomed earth.

Lahiri scholars and literature critics have paid a great deal of attention to this choice of epigraph and evaluated its significance. Most critics have argued that in choosing a quote from Nathaniel Hawthorne, Jhumpa Lahiri emphasizes her belonging to the American literary canon instead of identifying with postcolonial or ethnic writers.

In “Ethnicity and Intertextuality in Jhumpa Lahiri’s Oeuvre”, published in *Naming Jhumpa Lahiri: Canons and Controversies*, Karen M. Cardozo writes that Lahiri uses intertextuality as a means of mediating between the universal and the specific (3). She suggests that in quoting Hawthorne, Lahiri evades any presumptions about ethnic identity and instead offers “an unabashed bid to claim America” (6). Cardozo argues that in spite of Lahiri recognizing and writing about postcolonial loss, with this epigraph, she invites readers to see the generative qualities of migration as well. Cardozo proposes that Lahiri’s use of the metaphor of “unaccustomed earth” reflects “both Bengali-American experiences and the universal inevitability of intergenerational change, something that Hawthorne – the consummate insider – also understood” (6).

Drawing from Bhabha’s theory of the “third space” as well as other literary theorists’ texts, Cardozo suggests that intertextuality functions as a metaphor for the “in-between” nature of ethnic and immigrant subjectivity (7). She further argues that “ethnicity is itself a form of intertextuality, since it is largely in reference to *them* that an ethnic *us* is produced” (7).

Cardozo proposes that Lahiri’s intertextual gesture invokes a realization that it is not only the less fortunate immigrants, but also seemingly privileged second-generation Bengali Americans that suffer from displacement. Cardozo offers that “all human experience is ethnic experience in the sense that ethnicity simply signifies cultural practices and forms of belonging” (10). She does not deny that there can be an unequal distribution of privileges and challenges across and among various groups of people, but proposes that the division cannot be made according to a presumed ethnic/non-ethnic basis. Cardozo writes: “Lahiri’s sustained deployment of intertextuality suggests that – across cultural and geographic locations – to live, to love, and to move is to be unable to hold on to tradition in any pure or uncomplicated way; the best one can do is to ascertain ethical uses of the past for the future” (10). Lahiri’s oeuvre can be interpreted as contemplation on the future of ethnic identity in America (10). Indeed, much of Lahiri’s writing, and the whole of *Unaccustomed Earth*, is focused on inter-generational experiences. Cardozo points out how the title story plays with Hawthorne’s metaphor of cultivating, of “planting” one’s children in new territory. In the title story, Ruma’s father, who is skilled in gardening, attempts

to bond with his grandson by introducing him to botany, but the little boy nurtures a different kind of garden by planting Lego pieces and other toys in the soil (11). Ruma's father's hopes and expectations for his offspring are not realized according to his plans; instead, they must build their own identities and find their own way. Cardozo argues that in Lahiri's fiction, ethnic identities are "networks, routes of transit, and forms of attachment" that connect American ethnic subjects with the rest of the world (12).

I do not question that the epigraph to *Unaccustomed Earth* has been carefully chosen by Lahiri, but I limit its importance to being an introduction to a theme rather than a key for analysing the entire story cycle. My own interpretation is that the quote juxtaposes the first and the second generations' experiences; it condenses the hopefulness and certainty in making the right choice in emigrating that the first generation has, but the stories themselves then demonstrate how well or poorly this cultivation has succeeded in the second generation. If one were to attempt to find a key to the story cycle in the epigraph, I would suggest it lies instead in the line "so far as their fortunes may be within my control". In Jhumpa Lahiri's stories, in spite of their attempts to the contrary, parents have very little control over the fortunes of their offspring; in fact, their intervention often appears to have an adverse effect. The stories in *Unaccustomed Earth* have more to do with inter-generational conflict, and how it is heightened by ethnicity and a migrant past, than with the act of migration itself.

Susan Koshy mentions the epigraph in "Neoliberal Family Matters" as well, and proposes that while Hawthorne's passage "affirms the regenerative power of diasporic movement through the naturalistic metaphor of transplantation, Lahiri's citation of the passage is more pensive, ironic" (2013: 9). Koshy points out that in opposition to Hawthorne's hopeful tone, Lahiri's stories show that cultural transplantation is an unpredictable, uncontrollable process subjected to uncertainties and disappointments (2013: 9). Koshy suggests that Hawthorne's prophetic, paternal voice is effectively undercut by the secondary voices in the stories (2013: 10). Lahiri's emphasis is clearly on listening to these secondary voices.

The epigraph borrowed from Hawthorne has also been discussed by Rajini Srikanth. She suggests that "the stories in *Unaccustomed Earth* (2008) offer a comforting

version of ‘difference’ within the twenty-first-century cultural politics of the United States” (51). Srikanth argues that *Unaccustomed Earth* offers proof of the American socio-cultural environment’s ability to accept the not-too unfamiliar Other (53). She goes on to suggest that Lahiri’s characters are “not too spicy”, and that her narratives are de-historicized and de-politicized, and, for example, omit many institutional challenges, such as changes in immigration laws, that her characters face (53). Srikanth quotes Gerard Genette in explaining how an epigraph functions: it clarifies and explains the title of the work, and supplies a heuristic framework for reading. An equally important fact to consider is whose words are quoted – with epigraphs, writers choose their peers, and their place in the pantheon (55). Srikanth argues that by choosing to quote Hawthorne, Lahiri expresses “her desire to be seen as writing fully within the American literary tradition and her confidence in positioning herself within the American literary pantheon” (55). I do not place as much value on positioning as Srikanth, and propose that instead of attempting to establish a connection with Hawthorne regarding her place in the same literary pantheon, Lahiri’s purpose is to invoke a paternal figure in readers’ minds. Hawthorne’s words represent the ideas of the first-generation immigrant fathers, and illustrate how these primary immigrants justify their decision to leave India in the first place.

Srikanth suggests that the first generation of immigrants, the parents of Lahiri’s protagonists, have “struggled to throw down roots in this unaccustomed earth” (57), but their offspring have become accustomed to the cultural landscape, and that most of them are now firmly grounded in the United States. Srikanth notes that Lahiri is not a political writer, and any difficulties caused by displacement in the stories take place within the family, in the realm of the private space. She claims that Lahiri’s young Indian Americans are capable and confident, and find their place fairly easily (60). “If some of her characters do not reach their full potential, it is implied that it is not the American system that is to blame,” writes Srikanth (60). Srikanth goes on to suggest that Lahiri succeeds in generating empathy for her protagonists, “the strangers in our midst”, because the strangers she writes about are not actual strangers. In Srikanth’s opinion, Lahiri’s Indian American characters are different only on the surface, but are seen as “impeccably authentic and perfectly believable and drawn from circumstances with which she is entirely familiar” (59). Srikanth

claims that Lahiri's characters do not criticize the "unaccustomed earth" into which they have struck down their roots (66).

I question some parts of Srikanth's analysis, as I feel that her impression of the United States according to Lahiri, as well as her view of some of Lahiri's characters, is perhaps too positive. It is true that in Lahiri's writing, the focus is always on the individuals, and they belong to a very heterogeneous population group in reality. Lahiri focuses more on the family unit than the ethnic group, even when it is clear that the dysfunction in some of her characters' families is rooted in the displacement brought about by belonging to an ethnic minority. In *Unaccustomed Earth*, Lahiri's characters might not criticize the United States as a cause to their problems, but I propose that these problems are still indirectly a result of rootlessness that stems from standing at the crossroads of two countries and cultures.

Jeffrey Bilbro has looked beyond the epigraph, and drawn other parallels between Hawthorne's and Lahiri's writing. In his essay "Lahiri's Hawthornian Roots: Art and Tradition in 'Hema and Kaushik'", Bilbro applies Hans-Georg Gadamer's hermeneutic theory of tradition and understanding to the identity formation of Lahiri's characters. Gadamer writes that tradition "needs to be affirmed, embraced, cultivated" for it to be handed down (281). Bilbro argues that Lahiri's stories suggest the preservation and cultivation of the past to be essential for moving forward – "one's relation to the past affects and even determines one's ability to live out a hybrid, postnational identity" (381). Bilbro accurately points out how previous Lahiri scholarship has overlooked the necessity of dealing with one's past in working toward a postnational identity. Bilbro suggests that "characters who attempt to step outside of tradition and act as ahistorical agents inevitably doom themselves to futile, internal antagonism; they remain bound to a past they want to escape and unable to root themselves in any tradition" (383). In order to "flourish in unaccustomed earth", these individuals must accept the limits to their agency and learn to translate between their native and new traditions (383). This idea of the importance of dealing with the past is not entirely new to Lahiri criticism, and has similarities to Derrida's idea of postcolonial inheritance as an imaginative task of interpreting the past, as discussed in Koshy's essay. Bilbro's article continues with a detailed analysis of "Hema and Kaushik" and its parallels with Hawthorne's *The Marble Faun*, which Lahiri has

admitted to have been an inspiration for “Going Ashore”, the last story in the “Hema and Kaushik” novella.

Bilbro’s article offers a solid base for my research in looking into actual reasons why some characters in Lahiri’s stories are more successful in negotiating their cultural identity. I move forward from Bilbro’s premise of the necessity of translation in identity formation, and suggest that in a diasporic setting, women are better equipped for this negotiation than men, due to their traditional role as transmitters of culture.

An essay by Maswood A.F.M. Akhter titled “My Children... Shall Strike Their Roots into Unaccustomed Earth: Representation of Diasporic Bengalis in Jhumpa Lahiri’s latest Collection of Short Stories” deserves a mention in this chapter for raising the question of cultural authenticity. Akhter acknowledges that Lahiri’s themes include displacement, the process of integration and the accompanying loss of one’s original culture, as well as the search for one’s own identity (99). Akhter proposes that Lahiri’s characters have a distinct feature that distinguishes them from other diasporas: Bengal has existed as a “distinct cultural formation within the Indian subcontinent, embracing and synthesizing various religious, spiritual and philosophical communities in the subcontinental social milieu” (101). Akhter argues that because of their position, Bengalis have a special kind of adaptability – and ability to accept external elements without having to renounce their own individuality (101).

Lahiri’s writing illustrates how the second generation’s dislocation can be even harder to deal with than the transplantation traumas of the first generation (103). The first generation has an idea of “home”, a place they can visit, even if they no longer belong to it. Akhter suggests that Lahiri takes this displacement a step further in *Unaccustomed Earth* by describing how the crisis of the parent-child relationship is heightened by the challenge of a diasporic existence (103). In his words: “The children tend to question the relevance of the past to the present, of old and distant customs to the new and different environment while their parents fear the impending loss of their dearly nurtured original culture and identity... Yet, while due to the generation gap, the migrants and their children inhabit dissimilar spaces in the host culture, their understanding of rootlessness and displacement can also be of a parallel

nature” (103). Akhter observes that both generations wander in-between two worlds or subjectivities (103).

Akhter mentions how Ruma’s father plants a garden in the backyard in the title story, and points out that the garden is a motif that occurs frequently in immigration literature, linking the past and present, symbolizing nurture and providing something fixed amid changes (105). He goes on to suggest that language and food are also tightly linked to cultural identity in Lahiri’s stories (106). Akhter does not explore reasons why some characters are more at home and able to find their place in the world than others, despite having a similar background.

Akhter commends Lahiri for her perceptiveness and eye for detail, but criticizes that her representation of Bengali characters is limited or insulated (106). Due to their privileged position, her characters are generally not subjected to the racial discrimination that usually emerges in diaspora literature (Akhter 107). Rajini Srikanth has made the same observation, but suggests that it is not a bad choice, as some diaspora writers, for example Bharati Mukherjee, have been criticized for inauthenticity when they have ventured too far from their personal experience (Srikanth 59).

Akhter positions Lahiri as a feminist writer; he claims that she portrays the older generation of Bengali women as confined figures, reinforcing the negative, stereotypical view that average American readers might have about Indian life and culture, and suggesting that the diasporic existence would be a better location for a woman (108). He draws a parallel between Lahiri and the writing of Bharati Mukherjee, Monica Ali and Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, suggesting that they all testify for the diasporic space as an enabling space for a woman (109). He offers that sexual liberation has set second-generation women on their path towards assimilation, and that their rejection of the traditional arranged marriage to another Bengali plays a key role in their integration to American culture (109). He claims that many of the male characters are “accommodationists”, who are able to immerse themselves into mainstream American life in the work place, but preserve their original (patriarchal) cultural identity at home (110). Akhter argues that like most diasporic literature, Lahiri’s writing too appears to discourage purist conformity with

the culture of one's origin, and encourages the necessity of assimilation and acculturation (111).

Akhter is perceptive in his analysis of Lahiri's characters' concept of "home". Quoting Gogol in *The Namesake*, he suggests that "the first generation strives to exist as part of some makeshift extended Bengali family in this kinless land", whereas their children are "more mobile in linguistic, religious and cultural terms" (113). Akhter offers that "salvation in the diaspora's disquiet journey lies in the acceptance of the inevitable existential ambivalence and negotiating accordingly" (114), but does not elaborate how this negotiation is done, or why some appear more successful in it than others.

Akhter claims that because of her diasporic existence and "inadequate knowledge and experience of original geographical and cultural scapes, Lahiri's narratives tend to indulge at times in pre-existing white stereotypes of eastern idiosyncrasies and the fetishized symbols of the eastern culture" (115). He acknowledges that as a diaspora writer, Lahiri has a unique point of view, but her position is problematic as American readers see her as Indian, whereas Indians will evaluate her text for the authenticity of its portrayal of Bengali culture. However, he does note that it is difficult to establish a line between exotification and describing ethnicity. He suggests that Lahiri's portrayal of Bengalis is sympathetic and nostalgic rather than judgmental (116). I find the question of authenticity difficult, as a writer's perspective is always shaped by his or her own experiences, and therefore "authentic".

Salman Rushdie discusses the fragmentary nature of a writer's vision in his 1991 essay "Imaginary Homelands". When a writer looks back, he/she should be aware that "we will not be capable of reclaiming precisely the thing that was lost; that we will, in short, create fictions, not actual cities or villages, but invisible ones, imaginary homelands, Indias of the mind" (Rushdie 1991: 10). The exiled writer's text is likely to contain unintentional inaccuracies due to the fragmentary nature of memory, and can provide only an unreliable or biased depiction. Rushdie proposes that when writing about India outside India, the writer is dealing with a broken mirror with some of its pieces lost forever (1991: 10). This is a valid point to keep in mind when evaluating the authenticity of the work of all diaspora writers, including Jhumpa Lahiri.

Akhter concludes his discussion by suggesting that Lahiri does not offer any prescription to how the Bengali diaspora should go about their lives, but merely depicts the characters' attempts to "cope with the chaos of multiple displacements and generational conflicts" (118). He suggests that Lahiri's representation of diaspora "appears to foreground the positive transformative potentials of immigration, and the readers who come to her stories looking for the anxiety of displacement often turn away disappointed" (118). Akhter's view is interesting, not least because it is quite contradictory to Susan Koshy's idea of the dark "filial gothic", and hence illustrates how multi-faceted and open to interpretation Lahiri's writing truly is.

2.3 Family and Gender Dynamics

Several literature scholars have studied the portrayal of families, genders and generations in *Unaccustomed Earth*. All of them have acknowledged the tension between the first and second generation, but have given it varying significance.

Lavina Dhingra, one of the editors of *Naming Jhumpa Lahiri: Canons and Controversies*, discusses the portrayal of men and masculinity in Lahiri's writing in her essay "Feminizing Men? Moving beyond Asian American Literary Gender Wars in Jhumpa Lahiri's Fiction". Dhingra suggests that Jhumpa Lahiri introduces new definitions of the Asian American man, moving away from the stereotypical portrayals in the work of her predecessors (136). Dhingra points out that several Asian American women writers, such as Maxine Hong Kingston and Bharati Mukherjee, focus mainly on "women warriors" in their work, who, for example, protest gender oppression and arranged marriages. Dhingra observes that Jhumpa Lahiri moves beyond gender politics and is unique in depicting a wide range of male protagonists that evoke the empathy of female and male readers alike (139).

Unaccustomed Earth focuses on several male characters: Ruma's father in the title story, Amit in "A Choice of Accommodations", Rahul in "Only Goodness", as well as Kaushik in "Year's End" and "Going Ashore". Dhingra proposes that the timing may be right for renegotiating Asian American gender politics, and that Lahiri "displays a somewhat nuanced nationalistic loyalty towards her male protagonists

rather than a simplistic feminist revenge...Lahiri depicts Asian men as neither overtly aggressive nor egotistically fragile, but rather as well-rounded, human, emotionally vulnerable, and usually humane” (142).

Dhingra suggests that Lahiri’s depiction of Asian American men contradicts current South Asian gender studies; even if some of Lahiri’s male characters appear emotionally sensitive, they are not fragile or misogynistic, and do not have a need to be buffered or overcompensated (142). Dhingra observes that the majority of Lahiri’s male characters are husbands and fathers, but avoid strict gender roles (143). Her work provides “insightful details into the minds and hearts of men, and represents multi-dimensional characters, viewed in multiple settings, displaying differentiated emotional reactions in varied circumstances” (145). Dhingra writes that in Lahiri’s stories, the male characters often do what is traditionally considered “women’s work” at home – a kind of gender role reversal that is new to patriarchal Asian societies (148). Dhingra observes that these kinds of well-rounded male characters have not been represented in South Asian American women’s writing until recently, and suggests that perhaps “the layer of emotional sensitivity and self-expression that Lahiri adds to her portrayal of male characters will provide a new twenty-first-century model of a sensitive, emotionally vulnerable, feminized/feminist male, and allow future Asian American writers, protagonists, and readers to move beyond the trenchant rhetoric of the gender wars” (152). Dhingra’s argumentation is solid and interpretation of Lahiri’s male characters perceptive, yet I ask whether these men demonstrate an acceptance of who they are – are they depicted as being comfortable in their role as the “new Indian American man”? Could their inability to find their own identity be affected by their position of being in-between two cultures with conflicting expectations and standards for men? To what extent are Jhumpa Lahiri’s characters influenced by their heritage, or do they identify more with the notion of the modern American man that they have been brought up with?

In Chapter 8 of *Naming Jhumpa Lahiri: Canons and Controversies*, Reshmi Dutt-Ballerstadt discusses the idea of home and belonging for Lahiri's first- and second-generation migrants. Dutt-Ballerstadt's interpretation is that in Lahiri's texts, both first-generation migrants as well as their American-born offspring are exilic, foreign, nomadic, and displaced in their land of origin as well as elsewhere in the world

(158). Dutt-Ballerstadt suggests that the challenges experienced by the American-born, "hyphenated" subjects of *Unaccustomed Earth* differ from those of the first-generation immigrants, but are no less significant. Dutt-Ballerstadt proposes that "what makes the second-generation hyphenated subjects, perhaps, even more displaced than their parents is that they share ties to their postcolonial worlds (as a result of their parental upbringing and Bengali 'home' culture), but often are not considered 'postcolonial' subjects...they are often subjected to a double minority status" (159). Dutt-Ballerstadt argues convincingly that the hyphenated subjects are marked as 'Asian' in the United States, but find themselves out of place culturally, geographically and linguistically in India (159). Dutt-Ballerstadt proposes that as a result of this 'double displacement', Lahiri's second-generation subjects "become psychically and physically foreign and nomadic and take refuge in wandering as a way to find a sense of belonging" (159). Dutt-Ballerstadt finds support from Julia Kristeva's proposition that "one becomes a foreigner in another country because one is already a foreigner from within" (Kristeva 1991:14 in Dutt-Ballerstadt 159). The clash between the first and second generation is clearer in *Unaccustomed Earth* than in Lahiri's previous collection of short stories *The Interpreter of Maladies* (Dutt-Ballerstedt 160).

According to Homi Bhabha, this dislocation is a result of wanting to belong to multiple locations but not finding a sense of home in any. Dutt-Ballerstadt interprets the dislocation of Lahiri's subjects as two-fold: (1) As a result of belonging to multiple homes concurrently, these subjects have many homes, and it is in this act of multiple belongings that the subjects are split; (2) the death of a parental figure disrupts for the second-generation subjects a sense of roots and routes, resulting in a loss of a home (160). In other words, Dutt-Ballerstadt claims that the dying of a parental figure causes the subjects' split in belonging to their homeland; "it is the death of memory and a disruption of the hyphenated existence when the hyphen itself is disrupted" (161). Dutt-Ballerstadt analyses the "Hema and Kaushik" novella in *Unaccustomed Earth* based on this idea. She claims that after the death of Kaushik's mother, "it is the scattering of the ashes in a foreign land, in a foreign ocean, that permanently disconnects Kaushik's ties to his mother and motherland" (164). Dutt-Ballerstedt suggests that Kaushik latently wishes for the last rites of his mother to be performed in India. When the family return to the United States after Kaushik's

mother had been diagnosed with cancer, Hema and Kaushik happen on a grave in the nearby woods. Kaushik remarks to Hema that “it makes me wish we weren’t Hindu so that my mother could be buried somewhere. But she’s made us promise we’ll scatter her ashes into the Atlantic” (*UE* 249). Dutt-Ballerstadt’s theory is interesting, and the fairly frequent occurrence of death in the family in *Unaccustomed Earth* does deserve attention. Death certainly heightens the loss Lahiri’s second-generation subjects’ experience. However, I don’t see enough evidence to support the claim that parental death would actually cause the displacement that these subjects feel; the origin of this displacement is elsewhere. If we return to Dutt-Ballerstadt’s example, the ocean in which Kaushik’s mother’s ashes are scattered is not foreign to Kaushik. His wish for her to be buried may simply be an expression of wanting to have a concrete place to visit and cherish the memory of his mother after her death.

In addition to the significance of death in the stories, Dutt-Ballerstadt brings up the idea that nomadism runs as a trope through Lahiri’s works. Dutt-Ballerstadt proposes that nomadism becomes a form of voluntary exile which the subjects find liberating: “These subjects are always in transit, always becoming, and always suspended in a state of irresolution” (170). Dutt-Ballerstadt again uses Kaushik as an example, suggesting that the death of his mother and the disintegration of his relationship with his father cause him to feel “out of place” and result in him taking refuge in nomadism. Dutt-Ballerstadt proposes that the double displacement which the second generation feels results in a feeling of unbelonging that causes these subjects to explore a “third space” that is different from what they’ve so far known as “home” (173). For example, Dutt-Ballerstadt points out, in the stories in *Unaccustomed Earth*, Hema feels a sense of liberation in Rome, and Sudha is most at home in London (173). The women experience freedom that allows them “not to be obliged to fit in either the Indian or the American cultures (where they are socially and politically marginalized) but simply maintain their exotic and “stranger” status as a legitimate yet mysterious mode of being” (Dutt-Ballerstadt 173). Dutt-Ballerstadt claims that Kaushik differs from the women in that he does not find refuge even in a third space (174). This is an interesting point, as Dutt-Ballerstadt appears to suggest that Lahiri’s women characters seem more grounded altogether than the men, but she does not explore this idea any further, or look for reasons.

Ambreen Hai has also studied the generational differences among Lahiri's characters. She explores the tension between the natal family, the family into which one is born, and the alternatal, the family or culture that one creates, in her essay "The Alter/Natal as the Central Dynamic of Jhumpa Lahiri's *Unaccustomed Earth*". She suggests that the stories in *Unaccustomed Earth* "dramatize, are centrally concerned with, and structured by, the difficulties of these often conflicting allegiances in the context of middle-class Bengali migration and assimilation into U.S. culture" (182). Hai warns against oversimplification; Lahiri's natal families are not plainly sources of limitation and restraint, but also deeply loved, needed and comforting. Hai suggests that the challenge for Lahiri's characters is building "an ideal coexistence of natal and alternatal familial ties that remain healing and regenerative and it is this challenge that for them produces crisis" (187). Some characters manage to achieve this healthy balance but others fail. In Hai's opinion, the book is not an assortment of stories, but arranged to "produce a prismatic effect of reseeing a central problematic" (188). Hai suggests that Lahiri's focus is not on the individuals' growth away from their natal families, but on their changing and undecided relations to multiple families, and the negotiations they must make in order to put down roots in unaccustomed earth (189). In an in-depth analysis of the short stories in *Unaccustomed Earth*, Hai comes to the conclusion that for Lahiri's characters, the ability to balance the natal and the alternatal is tortuously painful to construct, but crucial to their emotional sanity (202). Hai proposes that Lahiri's stories broaden the concept of the alternatal family to include an adopted community. In several of the stories, Lahiri's protagonists, as members of several families and communities, struggle to "balance their desires for selfhood and for community" (Hai 205). They also struggle, writes Hai, to make ethical choices, "to live and experience what it means to act with ethical responsibility in the process of building and retaining familial and communal bonds" (205).

It would be difficult to argue against Hai's analysis and the points she raises. Several anthropological studies support the idea that in Bengali culture, which Lahiri so perceptively describes, family, community and culture are inseparable. A collision with the individualistic culture of the United States is therefore unavoidable. However, Hai's detailed analysis fails to offer entirely satisfactory answers to why

some of Lahiri's subjects succeed in this negotiation while others fail, and her ideas leave space for further exploration.

2.4 Conclusions

The works of the Lahiri scholars discussed in this chapter all acknowledge the special position that secondary immigrant characters occupy in *Unaccustomed Earth*, and the challenges that are related to their diasporic existence. In addition, Reshmi Dutt-Ballerstadt, Jeffrey Bilbro and Ambreen Hai offer reasons why some characters are more skilled in negotiating their identities than others. Bilbro argues for the importance of preservation and cultivation of the past as essential in moving forward; he suggests that the most successful in building a postnational identity are characters who are the most skilled in coming to terms with their past (Bilbro 381). Dutt-Ballerstadt looks for support from Julia Kristeva and proposes that hyphenated subjects become nomadic and take refuge in wandering as a way to find a sense of belonging (Dutt-Ballerstadt 159). Hai comes to the conclusion that for Lahiri's characters, the ability to find a balance between one's adopted community and birth family is crucial for emotional sanity (Hai 202).

There is support in Lahiri's stories for all of these interpretations, but the studies fail to find reasons why characters choose certain coping strategies. Susan Koshy mentions that Lahiri's characters' ways to negotiate parental demands in *Unaccustomed Earth* are gender-dependent (Koshy 2013: 11), but she does not directly suggest that gender would play a part in choosing coping strategies for displacement, or in the formation of cultural identity itself. The differences in men's and women's roles are alluded to by most Lahiri scholars, but no in-depth discussion of this issue has existed so far. My research aims to fill this gap: to prove that there is indeed a gender bias in *Unaccustomed Earth*, and that Lahiri's second-generation female characters are depicted as better equipped to come to terms with their past and build a hybrid cultural identity than the male characters.

3 Second-generation Transnational Identities

As a writer, Lahiri appears to slip easily into the male point-of-view, and as discussed earlier, her stories offer a surprisingly neutral view of patriarchal Indian society. Unlike most of her Asian American counterparts, Lahiri's writing seems to be free of any gender bias. In spite of this objectivity, I offer that her stories include a presupposition that women are more able to negotiate their cultural identity than men, and find their diasporic existence to be less of a struggle than Lahiri's male characters do. All second-generation migrant characters in *Unaccustomed Earth* have cultural identities that are hybrid and performative rather than fixed. These individuals may be successful in their professional lives, but their sense of displacement hampers their personal lives. They may find solace in a third space, more often a mental state rather than a physical location, in which they are free from both America and India. The women appear to be more grounded than the men, possibly due to their closeness with their natal families, particularly their mothers, who act as proactive or counter-active forces in the formation of their children's cultural identities. In *Unaccustomed Earth*, Lahiri's characters apply different coping strategies for dealing with displacement, some of these strategies more successful than others.

3.1 Diaspora Identities

Historically, the term *diaspora* was used to describe the exile of the Jews from Palestine, but in postcolonial theory today, is used more widely as a general term to describe the movement and relocation of groups of different ethnicities all over the world (McLeod 236). In addition, diaspora can be considered a theoretical concept; a school of thought, and a way of representation and engagement with the world (Procter 2007: 151). Key issues that are connected to the term are "migration, border crossings, and a world in motion rather than in stasis" (McLeod 236). There is an emphasis on collectivity and community, and "the sense of living in one country but looking across time and space to another" (McLeod 236). McLeod emphasizes that this connection is not merely geographical: "Vital too is the emotional element of this acknowledgement of another place, that sense of having a cultural and affective

relationship with a faraway location” (237). McLeod acknowledges that it would be easy to then deduce that what we mean by diaspora peoples are essentially migrants, and many of them indeed are, but generational differences have to be taken into account. Many of those whose sense of identity is influenced by “migration history” are descendants of immigrants who have not experienced migration themselves. This school of thought applies to second-generation characters, as they carry the burden of dislocation in spite of being born and raised in the United States. McLeod proposes that for this reason it is more fruitful to use the term *diaspora* communities rather than *migrant* communities. Still, “the emotional and affective link these people might have to a distant location can be powerful and strong – perhaps more so than that of migrants, in some instances – even if they have never lived in or indeed visited the place in question” (McLeod 238). McLeod points out that even if shared links to the “old country” create a sense of common history, differences in class, ethnicity, gender, generation, language and religion create diaspora spaces that constantly fluctuate, and are open to arguments, changes and reconstruction (238).

If diaspora communities are in fluctuation, diasporic thinking and theory follow a similar pattern. The celebration of migration and multicultural societies as providing the end to prejudice and inequality typical to the late 1990s has in the recent years experienced a shift to darker tones again in the aftermath of 9/11 and other acts of terrorism attributed to migrants in the new millennium (McLeod 239). Diaspora peoples are discriminated against and remain ghettoized, not belonging and not allowed full-fledged membership of the society they live in. In addition, diaspora communities are not free of internal differences and inequalities. In lieu of the enthusiastic celebration of contrapuntal vision and multiplicity, diaspora theory cannot ignore the increasing emergence of texts in which “the concrete experience of living ‘out of place’ can often seem like a perpetual tryst with pain on a number of fronts” (McLeod 240). In *Unaccustomed Earth*, the characters belong to the upper middle class; they are free of financial struggle, and don’t encounter direct racism in their professional or personal lives. At most, they express being subjected to curiosity about their culture and home life, but little discrimination. However, every story includes a character that suffers emotionally from dislocation; in Lahiri’s stories, displacement is internal, and independent of the character’s material means or social standing.

There are long-lasting consequences to migrancy that are present long after the initial migration, and which have an effect on the individual's intellect and emotions. Migrancy is transformed from an act to a continuous state of being that shapes diaspora identities, which are connected to migrancy, but not necessarily the same as "migrant identities". For example, in *Unaccustomed Earth*, all of the second-generation characters have been born outside India, yet there is no question that by belonging to the Indian diaspora, they are also inheritors of migrant identities. They experience the consequences of migrancy though they have not moved themselves; for them, migrancy has indeed become a permanent state of being. The preference here is to use the plural "identities", since, even if similar by nature, the consequences of migration are individual and varied.

In his 1990 essay "Cultural Identity and Diaspora", Stuart Hall describes cultural identity as a production that "is never complete, always in process, and always constituted within, not outside, representation" (222). Hall points out that the practice of representation is always *positioned*, from a particular place and time (222). Cultural identities undergo constant transformation, and are subjected to the constant dialogue between history, culture and power. In Hall's own words, identities are "the names we give to the different ways we are positioned by, and position ourselves within, the narratives of the past" (225). Edward Said writes about "imaginative geography and history" (232), and Benedict Anderson refers to "an imagined community" (232); it is to this India that Lahiri's characters can no longer return to. Hall describes the diaspora experience as "the recognition of a necessary heterogeneity and diversity... a conception of identity which lives with and through, not despite, difference; by hybridity. Diaspora identities are those which are constantly producing and reproducing themselves anew, through transformation and difference" (Hall 235). As John McLeod suggests, "Hybrid identities are never total and complete in themselves... they remain perpetually in motion, pursuing errant and unpredictable routes, open to change and reinscription" (219). Homi Bhabha too has argued that cultural engagement is produced performatively; its representation is not "a reflection of pre-given ethnic or cultural traits set in the fixed tablet of tradition" (3). Instead, the migrant "has the power to participate actively in the transmission of cultural inheritance or 'tradition' (of both the home and host land) rather than

passively accept its venerable customs and pedagogical wisdom” (McLeod 218). To summarize, cultural identity is created or negotiated rather than inherited.

It is important to recognize the differences between the terms multiculturalism and transnationality in this context. Multiculturalism results from the intermingling and fusion of different ethnic minorities, whereas transnationality signifies functioning within varying locations. Transnationals migrate according to “the increasing globalization of information, economic, cultural and migration flows” (Steven J. Gold in Cohen: 112). Transnational citizens base their interactions on the need to negotiate entirely different milieus into a larger setting that spans international borders, politics, and ways of being. As Michael Ryan suggests, “our identities are more fluid and multiple, less localized in one single cultural model. Our identities are no longer linked to clear, bounded ethnic cultural traditions” (18).

Michael Ryan has observed shifting between different cultural identities among Indian call centre employees living in India, who have had to adopt a Western name and created a Western identity for work. Ryan suggests that “they come to identify with their new Western self and have difficulty adjusting back, after a long shift at work, to their actual lives and actual identities” (176). In her book *How to be South Asian in America*, Anupama Jain writes about similar code-switching among diasporic subjects. Individuals may intentionally or unintentionally change the way they dress, the language they speak, or even their behaviour, in other words, “wear” a different identity, depending on context. Lahiri’s characters live in a similar situation, and switch between these cultural identities with varying degrees of comfort.

3.2 Women as Transmitters of Culture

Various feminists, anthropologists and other theorists have debated on the role of women as transmitters of culture, the essence of the argument often being if women are somehow “naturally” dispositional to this task. I prefer to avoid the question of natural disposition, but acknowledge that this is indeed a role women are frequently assigned, particularly so in the case of Indian culture. As Virinder S. Kalra argues in *Diaspora and Hybridity*, the debate becomes more acute when diasporic

communities are considered, “where the pressures to rear children in ‘their’ culture and language in what may appear to be alien surroundings are so much more intensive” (57). In these circumstances, women do seem to adopt the role of cultural carrier. This is not to say that men would be uninvolved, but women bear the bigger burden in cultural transmission in the domestic setting. In cultures in which women are usually not employed outside the home, for example, in Bengali culture which Jhumpa Lahiri writes about, this role is emphasized. Kalra suggests that the role of cultural bearer can be both a limitation and a strength (57). It is a limitation when it oppresses the women that challenge the role assigned to them, as they may be denounced as ‘misguided’ or ‘inauthentic’. However, this role can become a strength if it allows women to achieve positions of authority in the community (Kalra 57). *Unaccustomed Earth* includes several examples of women assuming, or being expected to assume, the role of cultural carrier. Ruma experiences an identity crisis after her mother’s death, as her mother is her main link to Bengali culture. Usha resists her mother’s attempts to raise her as an Indian girl, and Sang is horrified by the string of Indian suitors that her parents have “recruited”. Kaushik’s mother is frowned upon for smoking and drinking, wearing Western clothes and refusing to assume the role of the tradition-upholding Indian wife. In “Unaccustomed Earth” as well as the “Hema and Kaushik” stories, mothers even become a metaphor for the motherland, allowing or preventing return to the homeland, or arriving at a new identity altogether. These examples, and what they mean in the formation of the identities of second-generation migrant women, shall be further explored in the next chapter.

In her article on immigrant motherhood and transnationality in Jhumpa Lahiri’s fiction, Ann Marie Alfonso-Forero writes that Jhumpa Lahiri’s first-generation female characters embody “some of the most pressing of challenges facing the postcolonial female subject in diaspora: in a nation whose values and customs are alien to her, she must preserve the Bengali traditions which tenuously link her to her homeland while simultaneously ensuring a successful future for her American-born children” (852). However, this position can be a potential source of empowerment; individuals can embrace some aspects of American culture while preserving Indian traditions, so that this negotiation becomes a site of agency for the postcolonial immigrant (Alfonso-Forero 853). As an example, Alfonso-Forero uses the character

Ashima in *The Namesake*, but the same applies to, for example, Aparna in “Hell-Heaven”. In spite of her initial difficulties, Aparna is eventually able to accept aspects of American culture and build a hybrid cultural identity.

In her book *Sexual Naturalization: Asian Americans and Miscegenation*, Susan Koshy discusses sex acts as assimilation acts. Interracial intimacy “emerges as a space for exploring new opportunities for female empowerment through the use of exotic sexuality” (Koshy 2004: 135). Koshy argues that over the past four decades, the relative value of the Asian American woman’s sexuality has changed in comparison to the white woman’s sexuality. The Asian American woman is now seen as a more desirable partner, and she has moved from being a sexual commodity to becoming the possessor of sexual capital (Koshy 2004: 136). Koshy’s definition of sexual capital is “the aggregate of attributes that index desirability within the field of romantic or marital relationships in a given culture and thereby affect the life-chances and opportunities of an individual” (136). As white American men are bombarded with increasing demands for equality on the behalf of white American women, the Asian American woman has come to represent the more traditional model of family-focused femininity (Koshy 2004: 137). In addition, with the increased appreciation for monogamous, committed relationships, “the Asian American woman, once a figure for sexual freedom *outside* marriage, has now become emblematic of the perfect match between family-centrism and sex appeal” (Koshy 2004: 137). In spite of Lahiri’s stories being frequented by inter-racial relationships, she does not usually explore the theme of sexual power in interracial relationships directly. In *Unaccustomed Earth*, the issue is indirectly approached with a reversal of traditional male and female roles in “A Choice of Accommodations”, and more directly addressed in “Nobody’s Business”. Both stories will be discussed in more detail in Chapter 4.

Ashidhara Das’s *Desi Dreams: Indian Immigrant Women Build Lives Across Two Worlds* (2012) is an anthropological fieldwork on Indian immigrants in the San Francisco Bay Area. Das investigates how Indian immigrant professional and semi-professional women accomplish the continuity of selves and identities while shuttling between the different expectations of the American society and workplace, and the Indian home and community. Her objective is to examine how professional

achievement and economic mobility can remake gender, race and class relations for ethnographic subjects. In compliance with her peers, Das suggests that gender is an important ingredient of immigration; “it is a crucial element in the composition of the labour force, transnationalism, moral conceptualizations, and ethnic identity” (Preface 13). Das’s research is relevant to the study of Lahiri’s upper middle class characters, as the Indian immigrants in the San Francisco Bay Area too have become something of a model minority, comparable to the Bengali migrants in Lahiri’s fiction. “For example, 41.22 per cent of the housing units occupied by Indians in the Bay Area are owner-occupied, 47.93 per cent of Indian immigrants in the area have a degree that is equivalent to, or higher than a Bachelor’s degree, and the median annual Indian household income was USD 88,540” (Das 4).

Why do immigrants of Indian origin then hold on to their traditions so steadfastly? “For ethnic minorities in the US, assimilation into the mainstream is possible only as a minority” (Das 5). Another reason for the return to Indian culture is usually nostalgia; Indianness is a long-held identity, and a way to connect across generations (Das 5).

Indian ethnicity provides a convenient hook upon which to hang one’s identity. A return to Indian ethnicity bolsters the self and identity, and this is not perceived to contradict the formation of an American identity. Indians in the US feel that a strategic (though partial) reactivation of Indian ethnicity will help them to rise in the race/ class hierarchies of the US, and will also allow them to stay in the model minority position. (Das 5)

Das suggests that there may be a subconscious agenda for the reproduction of Indian ethnicity abroad too: to demonstrate the supposed superiority of Indian spirituality, moral standards and historical heritage (5). The diaspora community is important as well; differences are actively repressed, as being loyal to the traditional culture in private as well as public is crucial for belonging to the model minority (Das 68). The motivation behind economic migration is often simple. As Das’s respondents say, they want the best of both worlds: “American material comforts and freedom, alongside Indian culture and community” (Das 94). Das’s findings resonate with *Unaccustomed Earth*, in which characters replace their Indian extended family “back home” with the tight-knit, local Bengali community. Lahiri’s second-generation characters grow up with a multitude of watchful “aunts” and “uncles”, who are close family friends.

According to Das, the immigrant Indian home is the principal site for the recomposition of Indian culture. In Das's study too, Indian women are usually viewed as transmitters of traditional ethnic culture, and the tendency for women to be Indian at home and as American as possible at work manifests itself widely. Many Indian immigrants in Das's study said that they worked outside the home in order to gain agency within their family. Correspondingly, Das discovered that female individuation and autonomy were often sacrificed in producing Indian culture in the United States (59). Indian diasporic women are expected to guard the family's honour by rigidly controlling their own as well as their daughters' desires and actions. The Indian community expects immigrant mothers to Indianize their children, daughters in particular (Das 60). Das points out that community pressure is not the sole cause Indianization of the second generation; "from deep within their own individual psyches, the mothers themselves feel urges to acculturate their daughters in the same traditions with which they grew up (das 60). Indian diasporic men appear to be culturally inactive in comparison to the women (Das 61). The stories in *Unaccustomed Earth* are rich in examples of this phenomenon; in "Hell-Heaven", Aparna's happiness and agency increase after she grows to accept that her daughter is American as well as Indian, and after she acquires a university degree for herself. Ruma and Sudha are raised differently from their brothers, and Hema and Sang are expected to abide by Bengali norms and traditions. These examples will be discussed further in the next chapter.

Das marvels at her subjects' ability to move between their Indian and American identities (127). She proposes that the position of her subjects is not entirely negative; transnational people are also trans-cultural. In addition to being fluent in more than one language, they are also fluent in more than one culture, with the ability to fuse individual parts of culture into a unique, new configuration (Das 119). However, what they produce as Indian culture in the United States is "authentic only in so far as it responds to immigrant needs" (Das 123). Das discovered that "expatriate Indian women who have lived and worked in the US for a long time return to Indian choices in a few key aspects of their lives for the sake of building up self-respect and an adequate identity" (128). This projection of an Indian identity is not perceived to be in contradiction to an American identity; immigrant subjects tend to believe that this strategic and partial return to their ethnicity assists them in rising

within class/ race formations in the United States (Das 128). The re-evocation of ethnicity appealed to many of Das's subjects as a means to boost self-esteem (Das 133). Das concluded that the inner 'I' of long-duration immigrants was no longer fully Indian due to American influences. The outer 'Me' had become diasporic in that it alternated American roles and traditional Indian ethnic roles (135). "Emphasis on diasporic identity and ethnicity is essentially a strategy for immigrants who realize that true assimilation is not possible, and that in the perceptions of the mainstream, they will continue to be 'different' and one of the 'others'... Those who have spent many years of their lives on the road to Americanization finally reach a point where they also begin to learn to be Indian once more" (Das 147). This research hence shows that the "performance" of cultural identity can indeed be a conscious choice, and a coping strategy. In *Unaccustomed Earth*, this finding manifests in the character of Hema, who after a bitter disappointment in love, turns back to her Indian roots and opts for an arranged marriage.

To conclude, Lahiri's depiction of her second-generation female characters concurs with anthropological research of real life subjects as well as diaspora theory on the role of women in a diasporic context. How these gender-based, assigned roles appear to affect the formation of the characters' own identities will be discussed in the following chapter.

4 Dutiful Daughters; Lost Sons

In this chapter, I will provide an analysis of the cultural identities of second-generation migrant characters in *Unaccustomed Earth*, and explore reasons for the characters' success or failure in finding their own voice. My objective is to demonstrate that Lahiri's female characters are presented as more successful in negotiating cultural identity than male characters, and explore reasons for this outcome.

Susan Koshy suggests in "Neoliberal Family Matters" that in *Unaccustomed Earth*, parental control, as well as children's reactions to it, are gender-dependent. Koshy claims that male characters like Romi, Rahul, Amit and Kaushik are all able to reject parental expectations and leave their community, whereas the female characters' struggle is long-standing and more painful (2013: 12). I argue that the sons may leave, but they are unable to escape; Lahiri's male characters battle feelings of guilt and failure all their lives. The daughters may continue living in close proximity to their parents, but are nevertheless able to negotiate freedom and independence for themselves. I propose that this freedom is achieved by the ability to "wear" two identities and alternate between them: that of the dutiful Indian daughter, and the successful American career woman. There are still exceptions as not every female character is successful, for example Sang in "Nobody's Business". The male characters in *Unaccustomed Earth* appear less skilled in cultural code-switching, and have less successful coping strategies for their feelings of displacement - nomadism, detachment and substance abuse.

Why does Lahiri depict her female protagonists as more grounded and skilled in wearing two identities? The natural explanation is that girls raised in an Indian home belong to the domestic sphere. As Susan Koshy points out in "Neoliberal Family Matters", parents have different expectations for daughters and sons, and this is certainly illustrated in Lahiri's stories, most clearly perhaps in "Only Goodness". Rahul's achievements are appreciated more than Sudha's, and already at a young age, he is given more freedom than she is: "He was allowed to wear shorts in summer, to play sports in school, things her mother considered inappropriate for a girl" (137). Koshy suggests that parental control over their sons' lives is mainly focused on monitoring professional achievement and less strict in enforcing sexual

discipline, whereas the opposite is true for the daughters (2013: 6). This appears to be consistent in Lahiri's stories up to a certain point: Bengali parents may turn a blind eye to their sons dating American girls, but do expect them to marry Bengalis of a similar background. Daughters, on the other hand, are not even allowed to date. What appears a high price to pay from the perspective of equality does benefit the girls in another way: placed in the role of the dutiful daughter, they gain a stronger claim on family, a deeper understanding of their culture of origin, and a stronger sense of belonging as a result. With family as a sounding board, they are more skilled in negotiating hybridity. Boys are allowed more freedom, but this freedom combined with displacement and non-belonging leaves them spoilt for choice, and perhaps unable to latch on to anything or anyone firmly. All of Lahiri's second-generation migrant male characters in *Unaccustomed Earth* have problematic and distant relationships with their natal families.

The common factor for all second-generation migrant characters in *Unaccustomed Earth* is that they have cultural identities that are hybrid and performative rather than fixed. The women appear to be more grounded than the men, possibly due to their closeness with their natal families, particularly their mothers, who act as proactive or counter-active forces in the formation of their children's cultural identities.

4.1 The Cultural Hybrid

Ruma, Usha and Hema are all illustrations of hybrid cultural identities; they are code-switchers who can alternate between Indian and American identities according to situational requirements. The stories demonstrate that this alternation is not always simple or easy, and not necessarily based on a conscious decision. However, in all of the examples studied here, the protagonist, who is usually also the focalizer at least for the majority of the story, meets with a crisis that affects her cultural identity.

Supporting existing theory on the role of mothers as cultural transmitters, the mothers of these three characters play a significant role in the formation of their daughters' cultural identities. Ruma experiences a crisis after her mother's death, Usha bonds with her mother and finds peace with herself after her mother shares an

experience from her past, and Hema struggles with feelings of inferiority that stem from her childhood.

Ruma, the protagonist in the story “Unaccustomed Earth”, suffers from double displacement after moving to Seattle. Her feelings correspond to the loss experienced by migrants; not only has she been “eternally banished” from her homeland India, being a second-generation immigrant, but now she has also given up everything familiar to her in America. In spite of not experiencing migrancy herself, Ruma’s personality has been shaped by migration history. As John McLeod proposes (238), diasporians may have a powerful and strong link to a distant location, even if they themselves have never lived there. Ruma’s Bengali is halting and she wears Western clothes, but, like her father, she carries loss and regret with her that cannot be shaken.

Ruma was close with her mother, and has defined her own cultural identity in juxtaposition to her mother’s. She appears to have taken her mother’s circumstances as a warning against what not to do, and always aimed for the opposite: to have a career, to be self-reliant, to choose love over obligation. As Ruma puts it: “Growing up, her mother’s example – moving to a foreign place for the sake of marriage, caring exclusively for children and a household – had served as a warning, a path to avoid. Yet this was Ruma’s life now” (11). Now that her maternal counterforce is no longer present, Ruma is at a loss. Ruma has associated many of the aspects of her mother’s life – staying at home to raise children, never cutting corners with Bengali traditions, always attending to her husband’s needs first – as cultural traits rather than individual choices. Ruma is shocked to find herself in a similar situation now, in spite of having lead a life of more opportunities and equality as a woman. In addition, the displacement she feels in Seattle after spending most of her life on the East Coast is probably not unlike what her mother felt during her first years in the United States. Ruma is depressed and suffering from an identity crisis, resulting from the confusion of being in a similar situation as her mother, and at the same time, unable to fully identify with her mother.

Ruma and her mother illustrate Virinder S. Kalra’s idea of women’s role as cultural carriers. Ruma’s father is still alive and well, yet her main link to Bengali culture has been her mother; Ruma even points out how American her father now looks (11). Everything Ruma knows about Indian culture has been passed on to her by her

mother; Ruma feels disadvantaged that she cannot do the same for her son – Ruma’s cultural heritage has been diluted from one generation to the next, and she feels guilty and sad for her involvement in this dilution: “When Akash was younger she had followed her mother’s advice to get him used to the taste of Indian food and made the effort to poach chicken and vegetables with cinnamon and cardamom and clove. Now he ate from boxes” (23).

Ruma’s language skills are a good measure of the extent of her Indian identity, or lack thereof: “Bengali had never been a language in which she felt like an adult” (12). Her mother had been very strict regarding the use of Bengali at home, but her father had not minded her speaking English. This, again, is an illustration of how the burden of cultural transmission appears to be the duty of the mother, also according to Lahiri’s experience.

In addition to mourning her mother and losing the link to Bengali culture, Ruma is burdened by guilt of not having asked her father to move in with her family, and not really wanting to:

She knew that her father did not need taking care of, and yet this very fact caused her to feel guilty; in India, there would have been no question of his not moving in with her. ... Ruma feared that her father would become a responsibility, an added demand, continuously present in a way she was no longer used to. It would mean an end to the family she’d created on her own. (6 -7)

Ruma’s relationship with her parents has been loving but complicated. She had always felt “unfairly cast, by both her parents, into roles that weren’t accurate: as her father’s oldest son, her mother’s secondary spouse” (36). Ruma’s feelings reflect the different expectations for boys and girls in Indian culture – traditionally, oldest sons carry a lot of pressure to succeed financially, and it is also their responsibility to look after the parents in their old age. Ruma’s parents’ marriage was happy enough, but it had been arranged by their families, and the couple had never been in love with each other. Ruma’s mother had relied on Ruma to be her ally, and to provide her with the emotional support she had not received from her husband.

Ruma now lacks the identity she “performed” with her mother – the role of the good Indian daughter and reliable friend to her mother. Ruma’s character embodies Homi Bhabha’s and Susheila Nasta’s ideas of the performative and constructed identity.

However, in his celebration of performative, hybrid identities, Bhabha does not describe what happens to a subject when all aspects of the performance are no longer needed. In Ruma's case, her feelings of displacement have clearly worsened, and she has sunk into depression. Ruma's crisis culminates when she discovers a postcard left behind by her father and addressed to his new travel partner, Mrs. Bagchi.

They were sentences her mother would have absorbed in an instant, sentences that proved, with more force than the funeral, more force than all the days since then, that her mother no longer existed. Where had her mother gone, when life persisted, when Ruma still needed her to explain so many things? (59)

Ruma's mother has been the carrier of Indian culture in her life, and the main influence in forming Ruma's identity. After her mother's death, Ruma realizes that she has very little in the way of cultural heritage to pass on to her own son and is engulfed by regret. When Ruma finds out about Mrs. Bagchi, she realizes that her father has been able to let go of the life he shared with his wife and now lives for himself. This revelation frees Ruma too from the guilt of not inviting him to live with them, and the entire burden of upholding a cultural identity that she has been unable to, and is perhaps even reluctant to, maintain. Ruma's "performance" as the Indian daughter is now over, not only to her regret, but also relief.

When Ruma decides, against her first instinct, to post her father's card to Mrs. Bagchi, she is finally able to move on emotionally. By letting go of her mother, she is letting go of her identity as a daughter, and her Bengali identity. However, with this act, Ruma will be able to "arrive", to strike down her own roots in Seattle, and embrace her Bengali-American identity. The choice to move on is a conscious one, made concrete by the posting of the card.

In "Hell-Heaven", the narrator, Usha, looks back on her childhood and her relationship with her mother. Usha feels estranged from Indian culture, and as a child, could not accept how her mother Aparna attempted to raise her. Having been born in the United States, Usha is able to "home in" on American culture; it is Indian culture that feels foreign to her. Usha's feelings correspond to Hanif Kureishi's view of the second-generation migrant identity: Kureishi considers himself to be British (Nasta 176), and has had a need to inhabit a more broadly defined space than the one allocated to him by society (Nasta 194). Like Kureishi and the young protagonists of

his early works, Usha finds herself categorized as an immigrant without being one. The difference here is that Usha is placed in that position by her family, while Kureishi and his characters are marginalized by the surrounding society.

Deborah is strikingly different from Usha's mother; Usha explains how she "fell in love with Deborah, the way young girls often fell in love with women who are not their mothers" (69). In addition, since Usha's cultural identity is more American than Indian, it was easier for her to identify and connect with Deborah rather than her mother:

She knew all about the books I read, about Pippi Longstocking and Anne of Green Gables. She gave me the sorts of gifts my parents had neither the money nor the inspiration to buy: a large book of Grimm's *Fairy Tales* with watercolor illustrations on thick, silken pages, wooden puppets with hair fashioned from yarn. ... Deborah and I spoke freely in English, a language in which, by that age, I expressed myself more easily than Bengali, which I was required to speak at home. (69)

It is painfully clear that Usha considers herself to be American; her Bengali roots are a hindrance and an embarrassment. Like Ruma, Usha too is no longer fluent in her mother tongue, and prefers to speak English. She identifies with the Americans around her, and feels she has very little in common with (other) Bengalis. Usha describes Thanksgiving dinner at Deborah and Pranab's house:

As soon as I saw Deborah's siblings joking with one another as they chopped and stirred things in the kitchen, I was furious with my mother for making a scene before we left the house and forcing me to wear a shalwar kameez. I knew they assumed, from my clothing, that I had more in common with the other Bengalis than with them. (78)

In opposition to Ashidhara Das's findings, Lahiri's text does not offer any benefits for Usha in "wearing" an Indian identity – for the adolescent girl, her ethnicity appears to be only a source of shame. When Pranab and Deborah have children of their own, Usha describes how differently they were being raised from her: "They were not taken to Calcutta every summer, they did not have parents who were clinging to another way of life and exhorting their children to do the same. Because of Deborah, they were exempt from all that, and for this reason I envied them" (75). Usha does not consider her parents to be preserving their heritage, but "clinging to another way of life". She does not recognize Indian culture to be her own culture, but

sees it instead as “the other”. Usha’s story also concurs Koshy’s views on the tight control of girls’ sexuality in Indian families:

She forbade me to attend the dances that were held the last Friday of every month in the school cafeteria, and it was an unspoken law that I was not allowed to date. “Don’t think you’ll get away with marrying an American, the way Pranab Kaku did,” she would say from time to time. I was thirteen, the thought of marriage irrelevant to my life. Still, her words upset me, and I felt her grip on me tighten. (75)

Aparna’s jealousy of Deborah is intertwined with her wish to raise Usha as a Bengali girl, and the attempt to keep her as an ally for herself while living with a distant husband in a hostile society. For Usha’s mother, Deborah represented all that was wrong with the United States, and any similarity between her and her own daughter angered Aparna. Usha’s parents resemble Ashidhara Das’s real-life subjects in the San Francisco Bay Area. Usha’s father is career-oriented and distant; responsibility for Usha seems to lie solely with her mother. Aparna is very strict with Usha; in addition to peer pressure from the Bengali community, Pranab and Deborah’s love story accentuates her need to “Indianize” her daughter. Like so many first-generation secondary immigrants, she did not work or study outside the home, and had a very limited social circle consisting only of other Bengalis. When the Chakrabortys’ marriage ends, Aparna finally realizes that Deborah was not to blame, and grows more accepting of America. When Usha leaves for college, she grows closer with her husband and begins studies at university.

Usha’s story demonstrates how her relationship with her mother affects her cultural identity in its entirety – Aparna represents all that is Indian to Usha. Due to the difficult relationship between mother and daughter, Usha rejects not only her mother, but also her ethnicity. When Aparna eventually begins to feel more at home in the United States, her relationship with Usha improves as well:

My mother and I had also made peace; she had accepted the fact that I was not only her daughter but a child of America as well. Slowly, she accepted that I dated one American man, and then another, and then yet another, that I slept with them, and even that I lived with one though we were not married. She welcomed my boyfriends into our home and when things didn’t work out she told me I would find someone better. After years of being idle, she decided, when she turned fifty, to get a degree in library science at a nearby university. (82)

Aparna's path in the United States is in accordance with Das's research. Aparna gains agency in regard to her husband and daughter by getting a university degree after decades of being a homemaker. Disclosing to Usha how Pranab once broke her heart and drove her to consider suicide helps her daughter to realize that they have shared similar experiences in spite of their differences. Usha's cultural identity is constructed through her relationship with her mother, and once this relationship improves, Usha is able to accept who she is.

Hema, the female protagonist in the "Hema and Kaushik" novella, is the classic dutiful Indian daughter, who is stuck in-between two worlds, and tries to navigate the sea of migrancy by assimilating into the surrounding culture as much as she can without offending her parents. This is illustrated in the story by Hema's description of her family's sleeping arrangements:

My mother considered the idea of a child sleeping alone a cruel American practice and therefore did not encourage it, even when we had the space. She told me that she had slept in the same bed as her parents until the day she was married and that this was perfectly normal. But I knew that it was not normal, not what my friends at school did, and that they would ridicule me if they knew. The summer before I started middle school, I insisted on sleeping alone. In the beginning my mother kept checking on me during the night, as if I were still an infant who might suddenly stop breathing, asking if I was scared and reminding me that she was just on the other side of the wall. In fact, I was scared that first night; the perfect silence in my room terrified me. But I refused to admit this, for what I feared more was failing at something I should have learned to do at the age of three or four. (229)

In spite of her later academic success, Hema is plagued by feelings of inferiority and fears of failure in her personal life. These mostly stem from her background, as not only is she a child of immigrants, but also her mother comes from a modest home in Calcutta; Hema mentions that she had neither eaten at a table nor sat on a commode before coming to America. As a result, Hema is raised according to Indian norms that are more dated than those of other Bengali homes.

As an adult, Hema still attempts to strike a balance between her needs for security and freedom; she travels to Italy to be by herself, but while in Rome, she sticks to the same daily routines, and even has lunch at the same restaurant every day. When on their trip to Volterra, Hema and Kaushik see a group of men that have lived in the same town all their lives, and will probably continue to do so for as long as they live,

Hema observes, “I envy them that...I’ve never belonged to a place that way,” (320). Like so many of her second-generation migrant peers, Hema longs for a place to call home.

In his analysis of “Going Ashore”, Jeffrey Bilbro observes that Hema’s profession, the translation and study of ancient texts, signifies an attempt to come to terms with her past in order to find closure and understand the present (387). Hema does appear very aware of herself, and conscious of the decisions she makes. When asked by Kaushik why she wanted to marry Navin, Hema replies, “I thought it might fix things” (313). Hema is fully capable of living on her own, but no longer wants to. Like some of Das’s subjects, Hema turns back to Indian culture and an arranged marriage in order to boost her self-respect and identity. Abiding by traditions gives her agency.

John McLeod suggests that in our time home is no longer a stable concept, and that belonging to a diaspora means embracing movement and fragmentariness (245). In addition, he argues that home has become more a mental space than an actual location. This is certainly true of Hema; resisting categorization as an Indian as well as an American, Hema finds refuge in Italy. Realizing that one chapter of her life is ending and another one beginning, she savours her days in Rome:

Now she was free of both of them, free of her past and free of her future in a place where so many different times stood cheek by jowl like guests at a crowded party. She was alone with her work, alone abroad for the first time in her life, aware that her solitary existence was about to end. In Rome she savoured her isolation, immersed without effort in the silent routine of her days. ... Like Calcutta, which she’d visited throughout her childhood, Rome was a city she knew on the one hand intimately and on the other hand not at all – a place that fully absorbed her and also kept her at bay. (299)

Reshmi Dutt-Ballerstadt observes that for some of Lahiri’s female characters, for example Hema, travel is a form of liberation; it creates a sense of intentional foreignness that is different from the feelings of dislocation felt at “home” in the United States or on visits to India (170). McLeod suggests that “Hybrid identities are never total and complete in themselves...they remain perpetually in motion, pursuing errant and unpredictable routes, open to change and reinscription” (219). Hema is adaptable, and able to reinvent herself from the role of the dutiful Indian daughter to mistress of a married man to the bride in an arranged marriage. She takes the

practical approach to dislocation by actively attempting to find firm ground. As Homi Bhabha has argued, cultural engagement is produced performatively; its representation is not a collection of predetermined ethnic or cultural characteristics (3). Instead, the migrant “has the power to participate actively in the transmission of cultural inheritance or ‘tradition’ (of both the home and host land) rather than *passively* accept its venerable customs and pedagogical wisdom” (McLeod 218). Cultural identity is created or negotiated rather than inherited. This performativity is characteristic of Hema; an arranged marriage to Navin does not follow directly from her Indian upbringing, but is a conscious choice on her part.

From the beginning it was assumed that as long as she and Navin were attracted to each other, as long as they got along, they would marry. And after years of uncertainty with Julian, Hema found this very certainty, an attitude to love she had scorned in the past, liberating, with the power to seduce her just as Julian once had. (298)

As Bhabha argues, those in the minority recreate tradition, influenced by the uncertainty and contradictions of their situation. Identity is more a negotiation of temporalities than a permanent state of being (Bhabha: 3).

Bhabha suggests that in-between spaces provide the terrain for elaborating strategies of selfhood, and the border is that from which something comes to be, starts its “presencing” (7). Hema and Kaushik meet “at the border” in no man’s land geographically and temporally – in Italy, before Hema’s marriage, and before Kaushik is due to move to Hong Kong. Hema and Kaushik’s chance meeting is uncanny; from the beginning, their destinies have been bound to each other, requiring a final climactic coming together in order to play out. Hema experiences her last adventure before settling into the life of security that she craves. After saying goodbye to Kaushik, she turns back to her Indian cultural identity, travels to Calcutta for her wedding, and begins a new life that is, to an extent, predetermined.

4.2 The Translator

Sudha, the protagonist in “Only Goodness”, has been assigned the role of cultural translator by her parents, and has voluntarily assumed the part of surrogate mother for her younger brother Rahul. Sudha feels that as a child of immigrants, she had

slipped through the cracks of nationality and suffered for it, and now wanted to ensure that her brother would “leave his mark as a child in America” (136). She made sure he received “all the right toys”, and books she had been read by her first teachers. Wanting to spare her brother from a sense of displacement, Sudha attempts to pave the way for Rahul into an unbroken, American cultural identity. Most of Sudha’s life, her focus has been on the well-being of others – of her parents and her brother. This focus begins to shift once Sudha is accepted to do a second master’s degree at the London School of Economics.

London was where her parents had first moved to from India; Sudha had been born in England. Photos from those years illustrated that at one time her parents had appeared to be fond of each other instead of the indifference they expressed now, and had still been intrigued and pleased by their surroundings. A weariness towards their life sentence of feeling foreign had set in once they had moved to Wayland.

They relied on their children, on Sudha especially. It was she who had to explain to her father that had to gather up the leaves in bags, not just drag them with his rake to the woods opposite the house. She, with her perfect English, who called the repair department at Lechmere to have their appliances serviced. Rahul never considered it his duty help their parents this way. (138)

Sudha acts as a translator between her parents and America, explaining norms and customs, and ensuring that their family home is not an eyesore in the neighbourhood. However, Sudha has inherited her parents’ displacement, and in spite of being culturally fluent in the United States, she never feels entirely at home. The years that her family spent in London before Rahul was born represent a happier time for her. Moving (back) to London offers Sudha the opportunity to experience familiarity and freedom simultaneously.

She was excited to be in London, curious to know the land of her birth. Before leaving she had applied for her British passport, a document her parents had not obtained for her when she was born, and when she presented it at Heathrow the immigration officer welcomed her home. ... Perhaps because it was her birthplace, she felt an instinctive connection to London, a sense of belonging though she barely knew her way around. In spite of the ocean that now separated her from her parents, she felt closer to them, but she also felt free, for the first time in her life, of her family’s weight. (144)

As her actual place of birth, London offers Sudha the possibility to truly belong somewhere. Her readiness to accept London as home illustrates her need to have

roots, to originate somewhere. As a child of immigrants in America, she is stuck in the in-between; in John McLeod's words, "feeling neither here nor there, unable to indulge in sentiments of belonging to either place...devoid of the rightful claims to belong" (214). In seeking refuge in a third location, Sudha's dilemma of displacement is at least partly solved, and her exiled existence ends with her ability to return "home". London connects her with her parents in a special way, since they had lived there as a family before Rahul, the favourite, was born. Being in London also offers Sudha the opportunity to focus on her own needs, and to put herself first. For her, however, moving does not merely provide an escape from family, or from displacement felt in the United States, but it signifies a return to the original homeland.

Sudha's life in London and relationship with Roger cushion her from her dysfunctional family: "She returned to Boston in April, during the break after the Lent term, a diamond ring from Roger concealed on a chain beneath her sweater, and this made her feel dipped in a protective coating from her family" (149). While in the process of forming her own nuclear family, Sudha begins to distance herself from her natal family. When Sudha's mother asks if she could ask Rahul not to drink at her wedding, Sudha loses her temper with her parents for the first and last time, saying she can no longer talk to her brother or keep fixing what is amiss with their family. When Rahul's visit to London nearly two years later ends in misery, Sudha realizes that she is no longer bound by the sense of filial duty that is strong in Indian culture.

She thought of how her parents, who had believed their children were destined to succeed, had fumbled when one failed. After everything Rahul had put them through they never renounced him, never banished him. They were incapable of shutting him out. But Roger was capable, and Sudha realized, as the wakeful night passed, that she was capable, too. (171)

Sudha realizes that in order for her new family to remain intact, she must let go of the past, of her guilt, and let go of Rahul. Her attitude towards Rahul's alcoholism reflects her cultural identity. Whereas her parents are unable to fully realize the problem, Sudha is capable of admitting that her brother is an addict and she can no longer help him. Sudha's new life in London has given her the strength to put her nuclear family first, and to protect herself from further damage caused by the past. In Jeffrey Bilbro's words, in order to flourish in unaccustomed earth, "individuals must

accept the limits to their agency and learn to translate between their native and new traditions” (383). Without any good alternatives, Sudha pays a high price for closure.

4.3 The Validation Seeker

In *Sexual Naturalization: Asian Americans and Miscegenation*, Susan Koshy discusses the accessibility of sexual agency to Asian American women in interracial relationships in the United States. During the past few decades, Asian American women have moved from being viewed as sexual commodities to being possessors of sexual capital. In “Nobody’s Business”, the main character Sang has dropped out of university, and instead of pursuing academic success, now attempts to find other means of self-validation and agency. She uses, or attempts to use, sexual agency as a coping strategy for her displacement.

In her work, Koshy discusses sex acts as assimilation acts in narratives, illustrating her research with examples from Bharati Mukherjee’s novels *Wife* and *Jasmine*. Koshy argues that both novels are structured around a double movement: an effort to move *away* from the constraints of the gendered ethnic identity, and the attempt to move *toward* a less confined space, “a ‘frontier’ or unbounded space of desire, identified as being outside the ethnic community and symbolized through sexual relationships with white men” (139). Like the main protagonists in Mukherjee’s novels, Sang opposes the strict gender norms of the Bengali community. She is appalled by the string of Indian suitors looking for a wife that keep calling to ask her out, recruited by her parents and well-meaning acquaintances:

How dare these men call? She’d say. How dare they hunt her down? It was a violation of her privacy, an insult to her adulthood. It was pathetic. If only Paul and Heather could hear them, going on about themselves... These men weren’t really interested in her. They were interested in a mythical creature created by an intricate chain of gossip, a web of wishful Indian-community thinking in which she was an aging, overlooked poster child for years of bharat natyam classes, perfect SATs. Had they any idea who she actually was and how she made a living, in spite of her test scores, which was running a cash register and arranging paperback books in pyramid configurations, they would want nothing to do with her (175- 176).

Sang is not the typical dutiful daughter of Indian ethnicity; she has moved away from home, dropped out of university and has an older, Egyptian boyfriend. Sang clearly wants to live apart from other Bengalis, but considering her past in this close-knit community, being on her own is no easy feat. She can no longer rely on her parents for support, as after she dropped out of Harvard, “her mother locked herself up in her bedroom for a week and her father refused to speak to her” (181). In her need to not feel like a failure, Sang turns to her relationship as a means for seeking validation, but the philandering Farouk turns out to be a poor choice. Like the main characters of *Wife* and *Jasmine* in Koshy’s analysis, Sang attempts to acquire agency and power through men, “by inhabiting roles produced by the desires of men” (Koshy 2004: 139). Sang is a woman of many faces: the ideal Bengali wife to her unknown suitors, the exotic Indian temptress for Paul, and the perfect girlfriend for Farouk. Koshy suggests that while the women act with self-awareness, “the men in their lives see the heroines as being identical with roles they play” (2004: 139). This difference in perception allows women to maintain a limited power by hiding their true or other identities as long as they choose to – or in Sang’s case, until she lands in a crisis so severe that her serene façade crumbles. Sang voices her strong objections to her Bengali suitors in conversation with her friends, but is never rude to the men themselves – this implies that she needs their admiration to feel good about herself. Similarly, she considers Paul’s infatuation with her pathetic, but does nothing to discourage him.

Intriguingly, Sang rebels against arranged marriage and the patriarchal norms of Indian society, yet voluntarily assumes a submissive role in her relationship with Farouk.

When she wasn’t with Farouk, she did things for him. She read through proofs of an article he’d written, checking it for typos. She scheduled his doctor’s appointments. Once, she spent all morning with the Yellow pages, pricing tiles; Farouk was thinking of redoing his kitchen. (186)

As Susan Koshy writes, she is propelled into a more conventional and confining role than that of her parents’ match-making efforts (2013: 13). Sang takes her role as the perfect girlfriend seriously, but does not expect a permanent commitment from Farouk in return. Sang’s sister is married, has recently had a baby and lives in London, and Sang seems to crave a similar life for herself. She seeks validation not just from the

relationship itself, but also from Farouk's accomplishments; in spite of rejecting the academia herself, she takes pride in his profession. However, her admiration is not entirely free of criticism, as in Paul's company, she pokes fun at Farouk's dislike of dogs, and refuses to call him by his assumed name Freddy.

With his insistence of wanting to be called Freddy instead of Farouk, Lahiri appears to suggest that Farouk feels inferior because of his ethnicity, and attempts to take on an American identity by using an English nickname. When Sang says that she will never call him Freddy, Farouk points out that she expects to be called Sang instead of Sangeeta. "That's different. That's actually a part of my name," Sang replies (185). The exchange illustrates some of the underlying motives for both participants of the relationship; they both use the other for validation and appreciation while feeling inferior. Sang's feelings of inferiority are not caused by her ethnicity, but rather by not being able to live up to the expectations put on her as a representative of the Bengali model minority; Farouk, on the other hand, feels inferior due to his background, in spite of his professional accomplishments. While Sang uses her sexuality for gaining approval, Farouk appears to use sex as an assimilation act, particularly in his affair with Deirdre, a white American woman.

Sang's hopes regarding Farouk crumble when she finds out about his infidelity. To make things worse for her, Paul, who she already feels contempt for, is present to witness her misery. Instead of accepting the situation and making amends with Paul at the same time, Sang runs away to London to be with her sister. She avoids contact with her former housemates and gets a male friend to move her belongings from their house.

Sang is unable to negotiate her identity with success. Her behaviour corresponds with Jeffrey Bilbro's idea of characters who attempt to step outside of tradition but remain bound to a past they want to escape (383). Sang rebels against the norms of her parents and the Bengali community, yet carries feelings of inferiority as emotional baggage. In spite of rejecting the role assigned to her by the patriarchal Bengali society, she is not able to be equal and stand up for herself in her relationship. "Nobody's Business" demonstrates that using sexuality to gain validation, and escaping instead of facing problems, are clearly not commendable strategies to

combat displacement. In her inability to deal with her past and to effectively put down roots, Sang bears a resemblance to Lahiri's male characters.

4.4 The Diasporic Peter Pan

Without exception, Lahiri's second-generation male characters in *Unaccustomed Earth* are presented as emotionally damaged. Lahiri has been praised for her depiction of men and her ability to write from the male perspective. Her male characters usually evoke the sympathy of female readers. As Lavina Dhingra writes, "Lahiri provides nuanced and sensitive depictions of Bengali American male characters who are amiable, intellectual, caring, sensitive, thoughtful, often nurturing, and certainly not villainous" (141). Lahiri refuses to participate in literary gender wars, but instead, takes a very understanding approach to the emotional vulnerabilities of her male characters, and even toward the questionable choices these vulnerabilities sometimes lead to. In many cases, her female characters are portrayed more harshly, as individualistic and self-sufficient, sometimes even selfish (Dhingra 149). Lahiri provides alternatives to stereotypical gender roles, but without portraying the men as weak or unmanly. Instead, these men seem more attractive and well-developed as characters (149). Therefore, it is not Lahiri's lack of understanding that has led to her rather bleak view of second-generation migrant men in *Unaccustomed Earth*, but the opposite – the ability to see that they are deeply scarred by the conflict between the pressures to succeed enforced by their parents, and the exhilarating freedom of the surrounding American society. Somewhere, embedded in their upbringing, is also a sense of entitlement that may originate in Indian patriarchy and reliance on sons to provide; entitlement that may leave men detached in relationships, or unwilling to put in the required extra work for professional achievement.

As Susan Koshy suggests in "Neoliberal Family Matters", the simultaneous idealization and instrumentalization of filial duty in the model minority family generates extreme pressure to succeed on terms set by the parents, and results in the individual's conflicted feelings of being oppressed and feeling loved (10). This pressure to succeed is more intense for the sons; it is still more important for

daughters in Bengali society to be good marriage material – it is enough to be sufficiently accomplished to attract a good husband. Sons are expected to succeed professionally and economically. Lahiri’s stories illustrate that it is nearly impossible for men not to cave in under these tremendous pressures, and her male characters employ various strategies to cope – none of them very satisfactory from the perspective of identity formation or emotional stability.

In this chapter, I will focus on the second-generation male characters in *Unaccustomed Earth*: Amit, Rahul and Kaushik. I have grouped them under the title “Diasporic Peter Pan”, since despite their different coping strategies, they all share a common trait: an inability to deal with their past and to move forward; instead of growing up emotionally into fully functioning adults, they remain emotionally paralysed adolescents. The representation of all three characters complies with Jeffrey Bilbro’s idea of how one’s relation to the past determines one’s ability to build a hybrid, postnational identity (380). The male protagonists in *Unaccustomed Earth* are unable to apply a self-reflective, self-corrective view of their own history and tradition; they are unable to process their emotions and remain trapped in pain caused by the past.

Amit is the protagonist in the only story of the collection that is written entirely from a male perspective, “A Choice of Accommodations”. He is the son of Indian, cosmopolitan parents, who sent him to boarding school at the age of fifteen, and he has felt estranged from them since. This traumatic experience has left him with a fear of abandonment, now targeted towards his wife and children:

In each of these scenarios, he saw himself surviving, the girls perishing under his supervision. Megan would blame him, naturally, and then she would divorce him, and all of it, his life with her and the girls, would end. A brief glance in the wrong direction, he knew, would toss his existence over a cliff. (91)

Amit is a classic representative of Lahiri’s second-generation characters in his ambivalence towards routine; he is easily bored and dissatisfied, yet craves security and stability. His main source of security is his marriage to Megan; yet at the same time, Megan’s success as a doctor, absences due to her profession, and ability to be more at ease with their daughters causes Amit to feel inferior and even resent her. He admits to occasionally feeling as lonely as he did in boarding school. Traditional

male and female roles are reversed in Megan and Amit's marriage; he is the one who works regular hours, and spends more time at home with their little girls. The role-reversal highlights spousal loneliness, as Amit confesses to feelings more often heard from wives whose husbands have demanding jobs. Amit's attitude also shows that he has not inherited a Bengali cultural identity, but has the mind-set of a modern American man. Amit differs from other second-generation characters in that he does not appear to carry the weight of inherited post-colonial loss on his shoulders; his parents are transnationals who are capable of feeling at home anywhere in the world. Amit's trauma is not derived from migrancy, but having been abandoned by his parents as a result of migrancy.

There was no escape at the end of the day, and though he admitted it to no one, especially not his parents when they called from Delhi every weekend, he was crippled with homesickness, missing his parents to the point where tears often filled his eyes, in those first months, without warning. ... He learned to live without his mother and father, as everyone else did, shedding his daily dependence on them though he was still a boy, and even to enjoy it. Still, he refused to forgive them. (97)

Amit's inability to forgive his parents signifies his general inability to move on from past hurt. He never voices his disgruntlement but buries his feelings deep inside. Revisiting Langford, admitting to a stranger that there were problems in his marriage, and eventually confessing to Megan that he had been in love with Pam in college, liberate him and allow him to at least temporarily reconnect with his wife.

"Only Goodness" is a story of alcoholism in the family. As the only son to Bengali parents, Rahul is under a lot of pressure to succeed. At the same time, every effort has been made by his parents and his sister Sudha to ease his life. Sudha especially, having stood out as a child of immigrants among her classmates, wanted to make sure that Rahul got the perfect American childhood:

She told her parents to set up sprinklers on the lawn for him to run through in the summer, and she convinced her father to put up a swing set in the yard. She thought up elaborate Halloween costumes, turning him into an elephant or a refrigerator, while hers had come from boxes, a flimsy apron and a weightless mask. (136)

When Rahul is accepted by Cornell, his parents throw a party for nearly two hundred people, and buy him a car, justifying it as a necessity in Ithaca. In spite of having had

an easy time in high school, Rahul is unable to find his bearings in college, possibly due to parental pressure, the competitive academic environment, or inability to function without his close-knit family. To Sudha, he sounds distressed, even disapproving, when she informs him of her plans to move to London to do a second master's degree. His anxiety implies the fear of losing his sister intertwined with a fear of failing, of Sudha's accomplishments surpassing his. Rahul and Sudha's father is the stereotypical model-minority parent, who is unwilling to let a lifetime of migrancy lead to nothing, and expects his children to inherit and fulfil his dreams of professional success:

For years they had been compared to other Bengali children, told about gold medals brought back from science fairs, colleges that offered full scholarships. Sometimes Sudha's father would clip newspaper articles about unusually gifted adolescents – the boy who finished a PhD at twenty, the girl who went to Stanford at twelve – and tape them to the refrigerator. When Sudha was fourteen her father had written to Harvard Medical School, requested an application, and placed it on her desk. (130)

On the surface, Rahul seems able to shrug these pressures off, and does not see them as justified. Where Sudha sees her parents' separation from India as an ailment that ebbed and flowed, Rahul points out that nobody had forced them to move. "Baba left India to get rich, and Ma married him because she had nothing else to do" (138). Rahul sees his parents' motives for migration as merely economic, which gives him further reason to rebel. He wants to choose for himself, and instead of biology and organic chemistry, he wants to study film and literature, and become a playwright.

"Only Goodness" highlights how the ultimate embarrassment or cause of worry for model migrant parents is not their son's addiction, but the more superficial issues: his dropping out of college, working at a laundromat, being arrested for drunk driving, and dating a white American divorcee. Rahul's parents fail to admit his alcoholism, because it is a phenomenon they cannot grasp.

What could there possibly be to be unhappy about? her parents would have thought. "Depression" was a foreign word to them, an American thing. In their opinion their children were immune from the hardships and injustices they had left behind in India, as if the inoculations the pediatrician had given Sudha and Rahul when they were babies guaranteed them an existence free of suffering. (144)

Rahul attempts to deny his ethnicity; Sudha envies him for his non-Bengali looks, and for people being able to call him Raoul. Unlike Sudha, he does not feel he has a debt to pay or a dream to fulfil – he does not feel any obligation towards his parents. He feels entitled to what he has, and exerts his right to choose for himself. He turns to alcohol first to rebel, then to escape parental demands and expectations, and eventually finds himself trapped in addiction.

Rahul's inner world and motives remain shut to readers, as the story is focalized through Sudha. In addition to creating a different version of his parents' migration story – free of sacrifice and driven by economic motives, Rahul seems physically detached from his natal family. Sudha mentions how his looks differ from the rest of the family's, "his genes pulled not from the surface but some deeper, forgotten source" (137). This physical difference signifies an emotional non-belonging. Rahul feels like an American child unwillingly stuck in a Bengali family.

As Susan Koshy suggests, Rahul's story illustrates how the very practices enforced by the first generation to recreate a sense of homeliness result in the estrangement of the second generation. The attempted reproduction of human capital and authentic cultural identity become a testimony of emotional violence (Koshy 2013: 20).

Rahul's inability to come to terms with his ethnic background and build on it instead of attempting to deny it can be read as a reflection of the differences in raising boys and girls in Indian diasporic families. While boys are allowed to roam free, this freedom comes at a cost: emotional detachment from the natal family, leading to an inability to form meaningful relationships. Boys are expected to be successful and manly; as a result, they may be incapable of facing their weaknesses, let alone express or discuss them.

The three stories that comprise "Hema and Kaushik" offer the most in-depth study of displacement in the entire short story cycle. In the novella, Lahiri employs a narration style that blurs time and location, even identity. Most of the stories in *Unaccustomed Earth* employ juxtaposition as a trope; Ruma's and her father's stories run parallel to each other, so do Aparna's and Usha's, Rahul's and Sudha's, and Hema's and Kaushik's. They are doubles – two "versions" of identity stemming from the same or similar origins, with destinies that are bound together. Already long

before becoming lovers, Hema and Kaushik are physically close; Hema was pushed in Kaushik's old pram, wore his old winter coat, and when his family stayed with Hema's, Kaushik slept for a while in Hema's bed.

Both Hema and Kaushik have a certain sensitivity, the contrapuntal or double vision described by Edward Said: "Most people are principally aware of one culture, one setting, one home; exiles are aware of at least two, and this plurality of vision gives rise to an awareness of simultaneous dimensions, an awareness that is contrapuntal" (186). Their cultural understanding does not, however, reduce their longing for home. In "Going Ashore", when Hema admits envying people who have lived in the same place all their lives and will most likely continue to do so until they die, Kaushik is surprised. "You're complaining to the wrong person" (320), he remarks. This longing for stability, awareness of simultaneous dimensions and the ability to choose between them, ultimately saves Hema. Kaushik, like Said's émigrés, remains "insecure and dissatisfied, forever outside habitual order and stability" (186). He has been a nomad for so long that it has numbed him from consciously wanting a home; his way of survival is staying on the move.

Kaushik is continuously haunted by loss – the loss and lack of home, and the loss of his mother. Kaushik is trapped in the in-between, the exilic existence described by Rushdie, in which all one's thoughts and actions are defined by what was left behind (Rushdie 1991:19) – in Kaushik's case, his dead mother and distant father. Kaushik is homeless, and in a perpetual state of mourning; he "never fully trusted the places he'd lived, never turned to them for refuge. From childhood, he realized now, he was always happiest to be outside, away from the private detritus of life" (309).

Kaushik's inability to settle down hinders his personal life, even if his compulsion to be in motion is an asset for his professional life as a photojournalist. Said suggests that one can draw a distinct sense of achievement from acting as if one were at home wherever one happens to be, and this is certainly true of Kaushik. Said argues that isolation and displacement produce "a kind of narcissistic masochism that resists all efforts at amelioration, acculturation, and community. At this extreme the exile can make a fetish of exile, a practice that distances him or her from all connections and commitments. To live as everything around you were temporary and perhaps trivial is to fall prey to petulant cynicism as well as to querulous lovelessness" (183).

Kaushik is guilty of both; the constant exposure to war-zones and human suffering has left him cynical, or at least detached: he no longer remembers all the corpses he'd photographed, and his first instinct at the scene of an accident is to pull out his camera.

Jeffrey Bilbro suggests that Hema and Kaushik's professions are metaphors for their coping strategies for displacement: Hema is a classicist who translates and resurrects old texts, while Kaushik is photographer who attempts to freeze the past (387). Hema then, tries to understand history, and contemplate what significance it may have for the present, whereas Kaushik documents only brief moments.

Italy had become Kaushik's home base by chance after a long relationship with Franca, an Italian woman, to whom, "though at the time he could never come up with a reason not to, he could not bring himself to propose" (307). In "Going Ashore", Kaushik appears to still be on the same journey without destination that he embarked upon during Christmas break from college in "Year's End". His aloofness in relationships continues in his affair with Hema, as he cannot bring himself to confess how much she means to him.

Kaushik fails to free himself from the haunting memory of his mother, an extended metaphor for motherland and his desire to come home. In his romance with Hema, Kaushik is enabled a brief return "home"; she was the only woman he had ever been with that had known his mother (313). In the last paragraphs of "Going Ashore", Kaushik is revisited by the memory of his mother, her presence foreshadowing his own death. Symbolically, he perishes in the sea, dying as he had lived: leaving nothing behind.

Lahiri's pessimistic view of the lack of emotional stability among second-generation migrant men suggests an incompatibility between their home and host cultures.

While women in a diaspora are expected to act as cultural carriers and inherit that role from their mothers, men are left to their own devices. Ashidhara Das writes that Indian diasporic men appear to be culturally inactive. In the Bengali home, boys are expected to eventually take over their father's role as the head of the family, and provide for parents in their old age. For this reason, more masculine qualities are encouraged in their upbringing, and the boys learn to hide their feelings. Girls are

under stricter control, and this keeps them in the domestic sphere. They are literally more at home than the boys. Amit, Rahul and Kaushik are all examples of sons who have not been able to negotiate their cultural background and build hybrid identities; instead, their cultural identities are fragmented, and they are plagued by doubts and insecurities.

5 Conclusions

In *How to be South Asian in America*, Anupama Jain suggests that the struggles of South Asian second-generation subjects are defined less in material and institutional terms than those of other minorities; the American Dream has already been achieved, and now other concerns regarding assimilation have become urgent (193).

Transnational identities test the limits of citizenship, and teach us valuable lessons on the concept of “national identity”.

Unaccustomed Earth is not a celebration of multiculturalism and hybridity, or a kaleidoscope of model migrant success stories. It is a collection of short stories rich in dysfunctional families, disappointments, unrealistic expectations, losses, unrequited love and missed opportunities. Lahiri’s themes may be universal, but her perspective belongs to that of diaspora individuals. Her characters’ displacement is the result of migration, and their problems often the result of symptomatic behaviour as they attempt to come to terms with their dislocation.

In *Unaccustomed Earth*, the first-generation characters still view India as home. Bengali customs are maintained at home; the subjects visit India regularly, and raise their children according to Indian norms. This is not to say that all first-generation characters would be plagued with a constant longing for India or inability to settle down in the United States. Primary immigrants, the instigators of family migrancy, and in Lahiri’s stories usually the husbands, are consoled by the satisfaction they take in their work, as well as their upward economic mobility. However, as illustrated by Ruma’s father in “Unaccustomed Earth”, the path of a migrant has not been an easy one, and is instead filled with guilt and regret. The title story illustrates the epigraph in a very concrete manner: Ruma’s father plants a flower garden in his daughter’s backyard, including, symbolically, a hydrangea to honour his dead wife that would bloom pink or blue depending on the soil. His young grandson plants a garden of his own, burying Legos, wooden building blocks, a rubber ball and a pencil into the ground. Lahiri implies that whatever intention individuals may have for their offspring, the outcome will depend on other conditions, “the aluminium of the soil”. The epigraph captures the essence of the diasporic identity: never complete, always in process, and always constituted within, not outside, representation – positioned from a particular place and time (Hall 222).

Increased affluence and a higher social status have come at a high cost to secondary immigrants, wives and children. The position of wives in Lahiri's stories is perhaps the hardest. Violently yanked from their natal families and everything they know, they often lack basic skills that would enable them to feel more at home in the United States. Not having any personal motivation for migration (apart from accompanying their husbands), they are slow to build networks and put down roots in their new environment. Their social network mainly consists of other Bengali wives, which helps them in learning daily routines, but keeps them apart from the culture of the host land. They still refer to India as home, and live for visits to their old home country. However, as shown by Aparna in "Hell-Heaven", initial difficulties do not mean that finding happiness in America would be impossible to achieve.

Lahiri offers opportunities for professional and economic advancement as the only motivation for her characters' migration. These well-educated Bengalis can send their children to Ivy League colleges, and are not subjected to direct racism in their daily lives, as characters from a working-class background might be, and certainly are, in some other diaspora writers' works.

Second-generation migrant characters in *Unaccustomed Earth* have hybrid and performative cultural identities. Feeling rootless and yearning to belong, they strive to put down roots, and search for stability. The common factor among all second-generation characters in the story cycle is that they must negotiate their own identity between two cultures. How successful they are in doing that determines their happiness. I concur with Jeffrey Bilbro in that the stories in *Unaccustomed Earth* demonstrate that characters who are able to come to terms with their past are the most capable in negotiating their cultural identities and their futures.

Women appear to be more grounded, to have a stronger sense of self than the men – they seem more aware of making conscious choices in forming their identities. Lahiri's second-generation women characters form their cultural identity to a great extent in juxtaposition to their mothers, and can either adopt or reject the culture passed on to them. Men, on the other hand, are pressured to succeed academically and professionally, with personal issues given lesser emphasis. With parents whose marriages were arranged, distant and ambitious fathers, and mothers who stayed at home to look after children and the household, finding one's own way of being a

man of Indian origin in America can be difficult, as illustrated in “A Choice of Accommodations”, “Only Goodness”, and “Hema and Kaushik”. Based on *Unaccustomed Earth*, it is easy to arrive at the conclusion that transnationals are successful only in the professional sphere, and that well-meaning parents have high hopes, but little control over their children’s fortunes. The different expectations for boys and girls in migrant families, and how they affect the formation of cultural identities in other migrant writers’ works could be a topic for comparative research in the future as more literature by second- and third-generation diaspora writers emerges.

Taking comfort in a third space is typical of all second-generation migrant characters in *Unaccustomed Earth*. This escape into another, parallel reality puts the individuals in touch with their true selves, free from parental expectations and restrictions, and beyond the reach of categorization by society. The idea of the third space and its manifestation in diaspora writing could possibly be explored further by applying concepts from psychoanalytic literary criticism. In general, Lahiri’s writing is open to the psychoanalytical approach as some scholars have already shown.

The loss of a mother contributes to the migrant character’s sense of displacement in “Unaccustomed Earth” and “Hema and Kaushik”. I suggest that this follows from the idea that culture is transferred primarily through women, and one’s cultural identity is formed in relation to one’s mother. In “Going Ashore”, Kaushik’s lack of a mother is a concrete symbol for his lacking a motherland. In addition to diaspora theory, *Unaccustomed Earth* could be researched from the perspective of trauma theory.

Lahiri’s works echo each other like variations on a theme, and I have touched upon some of the common tropes in her writing. Death, doubles, and temporal shifts, for example, could be researched further in relation to the works of other diaspora and postcolonial writers.

The main contribution of my work to existing criticism on Lahiri lies in illustrating the negotiability and hybridity of the cultural identity of second-generation migrants, and showing how displacement continues to affect individuals long after their parents have migrated. As Susan Koshy writes, fiction helps us understand the cultural present by capturing “the pervasive social unease that erupts from the gap between

our experiences and the available vocabulary for them” (2013: 5). She argues that fiction is more objective and less affected by publicity, and hence more trustworthy than autobiographical texts in exploring neoliberal filial relations (2013: 5). Art reflects life, and fiction may indeed help us to understand the reality we live in. Exploring the mind-set of second-generation migrant individuals in fiction can benefit us in understanding some of the current problems in diaspora communities, for example, the religious and political radicalization of second-generation migrants. Lahiri and other writers of her generation offer valuable insight into the psyche of diaspora people, and the inheritance of loss that so many of us share.

Bibliography

Anderson, Benedict. *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origins and Spread of Nationalism*. London: Verso, 1991.

Bhabha, Homi K. *Location of Culture*. London and New York: Routledge Classics, 2004.

Cohen, Robin. *Global Diasporas – An introduction*. London and New York: Routledge, 2010.

Cardozo, Karen. “Mediating the particular and the General: Ethnicity and Intertextuality in Jhumpa Lahiri’s Oeuvre” in *Naming Jhumpa Lahiri: Canons and Controversies*. Eds. Dhingra, Lavina and Cheung, Floyd. Plymouth: Lexington Books, 2012.

Das, Asidhara. *Desi Dreams. Indian Immigrant Women Build Lives Across Two Worlds*. New Delhi: Primus Books, 2012.

Dhingra, Lavina. “Feminizing Men? Moving Beyond Asian American Literary Gender Wars in Jhumpa Lahiri’s Fiction” in *Naming Jhumpa Lahiri: Canons and Controversies*. Eds. Dhingra, Lavina and Cheung, Floyd. Plymouth: Lexington Books, 2012.

Dhingra, Lavina and Cheung, Floyd Eds. *Naming Jhumpa Lahiri: Canons and Controversies*. Plymouth: Lexington Books, 2012.

Dutt-Ballerstadt, Reshmi. “Gendered Belonging: First- and Second-Generation Migrants in the Works of Jhumpa Lahiri” in *Naming Jhumpa Lahiri: Canons and Controversies*. Eds. Dhingra, Lavina and Cheung, Floyd. Plymouth: Lexington Books, 2012.

Gadamer, Hans-Georg. *Truth and Method*. London: Sheed and Ward, 1999.

Hai, Ambreen. “Re-Rooting Families: The Alter/Natal as the Central Dynamic of Jhumpa Lahiri’s *Unaccustomed Earth*” in *Naming Jhumpa Lahiri: Canons and Controversies*. Eds. Dhingra, Lavina and Cheung, Floyd. Plymouth: Lexington Books, 2012.

- Jain, Anupama. *How to Be South Asian in America: Narratives of Ambivalence and Belonging*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2011.
- Kalra, Virinder S., Kaur, Raminder and Hutnuyk, John Eds. *Diaspora and Hybridity*. London: Sage, 2005.
- Koshy, Susan. *Sexual Naturalization: Asian Americans and Miscegenation*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004.
- Kureishi, Hanif. "The Rainbow Sign" in *Dreaming and Scheming*. London: Faber and Faber, 2002.
- Lahiri, Jhumpa. *Unaccustomed Earth*. London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2009.
- Lowe, Lisa. *Immigrant Acts*. Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1996.
- McLeod, John. *Beginning Postcolonialism*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2010.
- Mishra, Vijay. *The Literature of the Indian Diaspora: Theorizing the Diasporic Imaginary*. London and New York: Routledge, 2008.
- Nasta, Susheila. *Home Truths: Fictions of the South Asian Diaspora in Britain*. Hampshire and New York: Palgrave, 2002.
- Procter, James. "Diaspora" in *The Routledge Companion to Postcolonial Studies*. Ed. McLeod, John. London: Routledge, 2007.
- Rushdie, Salman. *Imaginary Homelands*. London: Granta Books, 1991.
- . *The Satanic Verses*. London: Vintage Books, 1998.
- . *Shame*. London: Cape, 1983.
- Ryan, Michael. *Cultural Studies: A Practical Introduction*. Singapore: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010.
- Said, Edward. *Reflections on Exile and Other Essays*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2001.

Srikanth, Rajini. "What Lies Beneath: Lahiri's Brand of Desirable Difference in *Unaccustomed Earth*" in *Naming Jhumpa Lahiri: Canons and Controversies*. Eds. Dhingra, Lavina and Cheung, Floyd. Plymouth: Lexington Books, 2012.

Internet sources:

Akhter, A.F.M. Maswood. "My Children... Shall Strike Their Roots into Unaccustomed Earth: Representation of Diasporic Bengalis in Jhumpa Lahiri's Latest Collection of Short Stories" in *The Sri Lanka Journal of the Humanities*, vol. xxxvii, no. 1 & 2, 2011. p. 97 - 118. <http://www.dlib.pdn.ac.lk:8080jspui/bitstream.21.5.2013>.

Alfonso-Forero, Ann Marie. "Immigrant Motherhood and Transnationality in Jhumpa Lahiri's Fiction". <http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/j.1741-4113.2007.00431.x/pdf>. 11.6.2014.

Bilbro, Jeffrey. "Lahiri's Hawthornian Roots: Art and Tradition in *Hema and Kaushik*." Doi: 10.1080/00111619.2011.594461. Downloaded by University of Helsinki 11.6.2014.

Gustafson, Sandra M. "The Cosmopolitan Origins of the American Self." http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/early_american_literature/v047/47:2.gustafson.html. 21.5.2013.

Hall, Stuart. "Cultural Identity and Diaspora" in *Identity: Community, Culture, Difference*. Ed. Rutherford, Jonathan. London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1990. <http://www.rlwclarke.net/Theory/SourcesPrimary/HallCulturalIdentityandDiaspora.pdf>. 11.6.2014.

Hore, Rachel. "Jhumpa Lahiri: Writing Makes Me So Vulnerable." *The Independent*: 15.6.2008. <http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/books/features/jhumpa-lahiri-writing-makes-me-so-vulnerable-845803.html>. 24.5.2013.

Koshy, Susan. "Neoliberal Family Matters." http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/american_literary_history/v025/25.2.koshy.html. 20.5.2013.

Lahiri, Jhumpa. "My Two Lives." *Newsweek*: 6.3.2006.

<http://www.newsweek.com/my-two-lives>. 21.1.2013.

Lau, Lisa. "Equating Womanhood with Victimhood: The Positionality of Women Protagonists in the Contemporary Writings of South Asian Women." *Women's Studies International Forum*, vol. 26, No. 4 pp. 369 -378, 2003. Elsevier Ltd. Doi 10.1016/S0277-5395(03)00081-5. Downloaded by University of Helsinki 11.6.2014.

Munos, Delphine. "Diasporic Hereafters in Jhumpa Lahiri's 'Once in a Lifetime'."

<http://orbi.ulg.ac.be/handle72268/3547>. 21.1.2014.