Re-establishing Identity in Contemporary Diaspora: A Postcolonial Reading of Jhumpa Lahiri's *Interpreter of Maladies: Stories of Bengal, Boston and Beyond*

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Abstract

The paper explores the possibilities of re-establishing one's identity in the context of contemporary diaspora. It investigates the multiple diasporic experiences of the inhabitants of diaspora through a postcolonial reading of Jhumpa Lahiri's collection of short stories, *Interpreter of Maladies: Stories of Boston, Bengal and Beyond* (1999). The characters in these stories inhabit the contemporary diaspora, created by people migrating to other countries for various reasons, since the end of the Second World War. This migration gained impetus with the increasing effects of globalization, resulting in a diaspora created in a postcolonial world, with immigrants from various backgrounds --- be it professionals, students, skilled labourers, or even refugees. Lahiri brings to light the disparate issues of the diaspora and explores their possibilities, not only within the physical geographical location but in different spaces as well. This is done through the depiction of experiences that are as complex and varied as their impact on the lives of these immigrants. Feelings of alienation, displacement, double consciousness, marginalization and unhomeliness are an intricate part of the diasporic world as are assimilation, transnationalism and hybridity. These experiences, in turn, urge the inhabitants of a diaspora, just as the characters in the stories, to retain and re-establish their identity, in the new world, through recognizing their culture and roots and transmitting their culture through the next generation.

Keywords: contemporary diaspora, re-establish identity, cultural identity, diasporic experiences, double consciousness, cultural connotations, hybridity

Re-establishing Identity in Contemporary Diaspora

The term, *diaspora* was coined from the Greek verb, *diaspeirein*, which means to sow or scatter about. It was first found in the Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible to describe the plight of the Jews after their captivity in Babylonia in the 5th century B.C. According to Michele Reis (2004), the human race has been witnessing waves of historical and sociological movements or "massive population shifts" (p.46) across the continents, starting from the Classical Period of the Jewish Diaspora. The period from the expansion of the European empire until the Second World War, saw the creation of the Modern Diaspora. This was caused by the transportation of indentured labourers, in large numbers, from the colonized lands. There has been another wave of mass migration, in the Contemporary or Late-modern Period, created by people moving to other countries, since the end of the Second World war until the present times. This phenomenon, voluntary or involuntary, has created a diaspora of ethnic communities, dislocated from their ancestral lands. With time, the diaspora has derived a metaphorical connotation to imply the dispersion or spread of any people from their original homeland.

The Contemporary wave of diasporization differs from the previous waves, as it is strongly impacted by "the progressive effect of globalization" (Reis, 2004, p. 42), and as a consequence, involves "a much wider range of diasporic communities" (p. 45). The diaspora thus created, is "more global in scope and more complex and diverse in character" (Cohen, 1995, p. 3) and the reasons, "far more numerous" (Reis, 2004, p. 45). Kasasa (2001, as cited in Reis, 2004) enumerates that the cause of this mass migration ranged from ethnic groups migrating in the aftermath of political and economic upheavals to people migrating voluntarily "to study, work or join their family abroad" (p. 46). This resulted in a diaspora formed with a community of people as varied as refugees, students, economic labourers and even professionals seeking better prospects.

However, whatever be the context of the journey undertaken, there are certain experiences which are common to almost all the inhabitants of a diaspora. Some of these experiences are displacement, dislocation, alienation, a sense of loss, and a yearning for the homeland. Though these experiences seem like trauma or a feeling of exile or rootlessness, they, in turn, urge the inhabitants to reconnect with their roots through re-constructing their cultural as well as individualidentity.

Safran (1991), has pointed out in his article certain features, which have been associated with diasporic communities since the days of the Jewish Diaspora. However, these traits, mostly based on the notions of exile, trauma, nostalgia and a yearning to return to the "original homeland" (pp. 83-4) does not include the complex nature of contemporary diaspora. Safran himself says in his article that the "diaspora community" (p. 83) in the contemporary world, comprises metaphorically, the people who are categorized as "expatriates, expellees, political refugees, alien residents, immigrants, and ethnic and racial minorities […]" (p. 83).

This thought is reiterated by Reis (2004), in his observations on the multi-faceted nature of contemporary diaspora in an increasingly globalized world. He opines that this phenomenon calls for interpretation from both the frames of reference: the post-colonial experience and the Jewish Diaspora. Reis realizes that the experiences of contemporary diaspora includes as well as necessitates its blending with transnationalism, cross-cultural sensibilities and cultural hybridity. This idea is echoed by Hall (1989), when he specifies "the recognition of a necessary heterogeneity and diversity" (p. 235) in a diaspora. However, this complex nature of contemporary diaspora does not exclude the feelings of alienation, displacement, dislocation, double consciousness, regeneration, and even, exile in some cases. All these experiences, encountered in a globalized world, make contemporary diasporas even "more dynamic and unpredictable" (Reis, 2004, p. 53).

Like many other diasporas, the mass migration triggered after the end of the Second World War has led to the formation of a huge Indian diaspora on the world map. Spread across every continent, around the world, the Indian diaspora has produced a rich harvest of writers who have earned critical acclaim across the globe. One such distinguished writer is Jhumpa Lahiri, an Indian-American author, who writes mostly about the experiences of the Indian immigrants in the United States. Lahiri won the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction in 2000 for her debut work, *Interpreter of Maladies: Stories of Boston, Bengal and Beyond* (1999). It is a collection of nine short stories, each of which is unique in its plot, setting and characterization. The stories, as the title suggests, traverses Bengal, the land of Lahiri's ancestors and Boston, the place where she grew up.

Lahiri's collection of short stories belong essentially to the diasporic literature of the postcolonial era. So, a primarily postcolonial reading of these stories would help in contextualizing and understanding the unique experiences of the characters in her stories. The stories portray a wide array of cross-cultural experiences of the Indian immigrants in America. Feeling displaced and dislocated, the first-generation immigrants strive to re-establish their identity in the host country by following their traditional practices, so that their culture is preserved through the next generation. The second or the next generation immigrants, on the contrary, grow up in a hybrid culture, along with the subtle discriminations they have to bear because they are never certain where they belong. Through her stories, Lahiri also makes it a point to talk about diasporic spaces created in the decolonized, yet oppressive environment, in a corner of her ancestor's land in India. These narratives bring forth the paradoxes underlying a diaspora, irrespective of its space and location. The oppressive ideologies (Tyson, 2006) some are still subjugated to, are as true as the realization of self, attained through upholding one's cultural and individual ideologies. Lahiri's stories can be explored from the postcolonial perspective of the "close relationship between […] individual identity and cultural beliefs"

(Tyson, 2006, p. 427), as the characters go through experiences that together, form an intricate part of the diasporic world. These experiences include marginalizing, othering, exile, alienation, unhomeliness, double consciousness, as well as hybridity and transnationalism. An analysis of the stories in this light would enable us to understand the significance of culture in realizing and establishing one's identity in this world. Culture, as Tyson (2006) points out, is not a static object, but keeps evolving with the numerous cross-cultural experiences encountered in a "community or on the pages of a literary text" (p. 432). Thus, it helps us to identify with ourselves, our community and with the world at large.

My paper attempts to gain a deeper insight into the diverse experiences of the contemporary diaspora, by analyzing the stories in Lahiri's *Interpreter of Maladies* from the postcolonial perspective of realizing one's identity --- both individual and cultural.

Tales of Contemporary Diaspora

Retelling the Past

The feeling of alienation and the loss of self and home, triggered by displacement in a diasporic world, urges some of the characters in Lahiri's stories to construct their identity, as Hall (1989) suggests, by a "*re-telling* of the past" (p.224). He further emphasizes on "the importance of the act of imaginative rediscovery which this conception of a rediscovered, essential identity entails" (p. 224). Thus, the characters revert to their past --- whether nostalgia or imagined --- to hold on to their roots and cultural beliefs and thereby, attain an awareness of the self. In the story, "Mrs. Sen's," the central character, Mrs. Sen, accompanies her husband to the United States and spends her days by recalling her past spent in her homeland --- which, in her case, is the city of Calcutta, in India. She always longs for her home

and often narrates vividly her days spent in Calcutta to the eleven-year-old boy, Eliot, who she minds for a few hours after he is back from school. It was not long before Eliot could easily understand that by "home," Mrs. Sen always "meant India" (Lahiri, 116), and not the small apartment in the University campus, where she diligently went about doing her daily chores.

The story titled, "The Real Durwan," is centered around the character of Boori Ma, a refugee from Bangladesh in the aftermath of Partition. As a refugee, Boori Ma spends her days in the base of a stairwell in a suburban apartment building in north Calcutta. She keeps her past alive through her frequent narratives about the glorious days she had spent in her homeland. This act of participating in an "imaginative rediscovery" (Hall, 1989, p. 224) of herself in contrast to the routine harsh realities she has to live by every day, seems to fill her with enthusiasm. Her audience sympathizes with her, saying that her habit of creating stories is "a way of mourning the loss of her family" (Lahiri, 72). However, for Boori Ma, it had become a daily ritual to revisit her past, as the memories of her native land filled her with a sense of belonging, even though it mighthave been a creation of her imagination.

In the story, "When Mr. Pirzada Came to Dine," Mr. Pirzada had been away from his country, Bangladesh, for pursuing his year-long research work in the United States. He keeps ties with his homeland by following the daily news reports about his country on the television. He always carries a black and white photograph of his seven daughters and a "plain silver watch without a band," deliberately "set to the local time in Dacca" (Lahiri, 30), which he takes out only during dinner time. These are his only tools for keeping alive fond memories of his homeland.

The unnamed narrator in "The Third and Final Continent," often makes a detour to revisit his early days of settlement in Boston. This journey down the memory lane, when he recalls all that he has been through, starting from his days in Calcutta, then north London and finally Boston, fills him with a sense of "achievement" (Lahiri, 198).

Lahiri uses this "*re-telling* of the past," (Hall, 1989) as a metaphor in the story, "A Temporary Matter". A temporary phase of power cut prompts Shoba and Shukumar to create a ritual of re-telling their past through confessions, which help them come to terms with themselves. In "Interpreter of Maladies," the story that resembles the title of the book, Mrs. Das absolves herself of the burden of guilt by recounting the truth about the identity of her second son, Bobby, to their Indian tour guide, Mr. Kapasi. This confession liberates her from the guilt of her hidden past that had alienated her from herself and her family for the last "eight years" (Lahiri, 65).

Away from Home

The negative experiences of exile, othering, alienation, displacement, unhomeliness and double consciousness, that some of the characters in Lahiri's short stories go through, make them conscious of their roots and thereby, help them establish their identity. Lahiri highlights the trauma the characters suffer, by using exile as a metaphor. Mrs. Sen's separation, from her family and her neighbourhood in Calcutta, seems like a metaphorical exile or a trauma that she has to cope with. She misses the warmth and camaraderie of her community at home which she keeps alive through her narratives to Eliot. She fondly reminisces the nights she could not sleep at home because the women from their neighbourhood would all gather at their roof to make arrangements for any wedding in the family. The women would laugh and gossip "through the

night" (Lahiri,115), while cutting loads of vegetables with their "blades" (115). On the contrary, she could hardly sleep at night at her present home, where she seems to be engulfed "in so much silence" (115).

Her feelings of double consciousness and unhomeliness aggravate when she is caught between the conflicts of doing household chores and the mounting pressure of learning to drive, which she must, to retain her job of a babysitter in the United States. In the story, when Eliot's mother interviews Mrs. Sen before appointing her as Eliot's babysitter, she proudly asserts, "At home, you know, we have a driver. […] Everything is there" (Lahiri, 113). Mrs. Sen embodies the peculiar and ambiguous sense of alienation, loss and displacement that the inhabitants in a diaspora often go through. On the one hand, she feels humiliated when the driver of the bus rebukes her for carrying the fish she had bought at the fishmongers. On the other hand, she also feels displaced and alienated from her own people, who imagine her to live a luxurious life in her new home. She shares her grief with Eliot saying, "They think I live the life of a queen, Eliot" (Lahiri, 125).

In "A Real Durwan," Boori Ma remains a refugee in exile through the whole story. She has been given shelter at the base of the stairwell in exchange for cleaning its staircases and for virtually being the "durwan" (Lahiri, 82). Though she visits the households in the building, her entry is restricted till the thresholds or the periphery of the apartments. In the course of the story, circumstances force her to shift to the rooftop for a while, before being driven out from the building and left to fend for herself. She leaves behind all her belongings, except "her broom" (82), which would help reclaim her dignity and re-establish her identity in the world, which remains an exile for her.

Similarly, in "The Treatment of Bibi Haldar," the central character, Bibi Haldar, is also forced to remain in an exile in the cramped "storage room on the roof" (Lahiri, 159) of a building. Her cousin, Haldar, has given her this shelter in exchange for listing all the items of the cosmetics shop owned by him. She is treated like the other, almost an untouchable non-human entity, during the pregnancy of Haldar's wife, lest the foetus is affected by Bibi's congenital disease. When Haldar's business fails, they shift their residence, leaving Bibi all alone with the remaining merchandize that could not be sold. The story, however, ends on a positive note, as Bibi gives

birth to a son and adopts the storeroom as her new home. She sets up a business on her own and expands it from this small diasporic space which is her world now.

In "A Temporary Matter," unable to cope with their trauma, Shoba and Shukumar resort to a life of exile on their terms. Shoba prefers to stay away from home throughout the day and Shukumar confines himself to his make-shift study at home. As the story unfolds, Shoba informs Shukumar about finding an "apartment […] on Beacon Hill" (Lahiri, 21) for herself, where she is going to move.

The problem of displacement in a diasporic setting takes another turn in the story, "Sexy," where Devajit Mitra or Dev, a married Bengali immigrant, takes advantage of Miranda, a young and unmarried white American woman who has relocated to Boston to pursue her career. She realizes her predicament when she meets a seven-year-old boy, Rohin, who discloses how his father has betrayed his mother. Miranda decides to regain control of her life and restore her dignity and identity by breaking herself free from the exile of living the life of a "mistress" (Lahiri, 92).

The Other

The complex predicaments of the contemporary diaspora are reflected through Lahiri's subtle descriptions of incidents that her characters witness. These experiences help them gain insight into the different perspectives of the diasporic world. In the story, "When Mr. Pirzada Came to Dine," Mrs. Kenyon, Lilia's History teacher strongly discourages ten-year-old Lilia when she discovers her (Lilia) in the school library, reading books about the places associated with her ancestral land. The teacher insists upon her to look for books on the American Revolution only. Later in the story, when Lilia and her "trick-or-treating partner" (Lahiri, 36), Dora, both dressed as witches, go around their neighbourhood on Halloween night, she recalls coming across sarcastic remarks like, "[they] had never seen an Indian witch before" (Lahiri, 39). When she returned home, Lilia was shocked and deeply hurt to discover that her jack-o-lantern "had been shattered" (Lahiri, 40). This incident seemed to ridicule Lilia and her mother's eagerness to assimilate to American culture. It pained her to think about the enthusiasm and interest with which her mother had bought her a "ten-pound pumpkin" (Lahiri, 35), which she insisted on carving "properly like others [...] in the neighbourhood" (35), instead of simply decorating "it with markers" (35), as suggested by her mother. Thus, at this tender age, she silently gulps down the bitterness of being treated as the other, in her adopted homeland, whose culture she is so eager to embrace. She also realizes the underlying difference between them and us when she observes "that the television wasn't on at Dora's house at all" (Lahiri, 39). In her house, during dinner each evening, it was on the television that her parents and Mr. Pirzada, followed closely, the political turmoil back home. The plight of another diaspora being created in the other part of the world with millions of Bangladeshi refugees fleeing to India from the oppressions of the Pakistani regime is symbolized in Mr. Pirzada's subtle humour. On one of his visits to Lilia's house, he refers to himself when he tells Lilia's father, "Another refugee, I am afraid, on Indian territory" (Lahiri, 28).

Hybridity

Since "transnationalism and globalization" are an integral part of the modern-day diaspora, it creates transnational characters for whom, hybridity is a way of life. This is reflected in Mr. Kapasi's observations in "Interpreter of Maladies," about the Das family who came to India as tourists. They "looked Indian but dressed as foreigners did" (Lahiri, 43-4), and spoke with an accent that could be "heard on American television programs" (Lahiri, 49). Mrs. Das' indifference towards her ancestral land, is expressed in her complaint against her husband Raj, for not hiring "an air-conditioned car [...] just to save a few stupid rupees" (49). To her, India is an anonymous entity or the other, where she travels only to unburden herself of the guilt she had been carrying for "eight years" (Lahiri, 65).

In "This Blessed House," Sanjeev and his wife, Twinkle, a second-generation immigrant, have a conflicting relationship as Sanjeev opposes her embracing the Christian religion with such ease. Sanjeev, who has studied in the United States and is now working there, seems to be struggling with double-consciousness. While he is still wavering between listening to western classical music and preserving his religion and culture, he has to accept, unwillingly, the reality of the hybrid culture that his wife, Twinkle, has grown up with.

However, Twinkle still has to justify her name, to one of their American guests, who remark on being introduced to her, "What an unusual name" (Lahiri, 151).

The assimilation of cultures and the simultaneous resistance to it is depicted very subtly through the characters of Eliot and his mother in the story centred around Mrs. Sen. While Eliot could adopt with ease, the practice of leaving his shoes outside the living room, his mother chose to ignore this and would never

remove her "high heels" (Lahiri, 118), even when she came inside Mrs. Sen's house. Strangely, Eliot thought his mother "looked odd" (Lahiri,112) in her regular western attire and hairstyle in comparison to Mrs. Sen, who always wore "sari, a different pattern each day" (Lahiri, 119). Eliot also realizes the effortless ease with which his mother drives the car while, for Mrs. Sen, manoeuvring a car is an enormous challenge, or rather, an oppressive task that has been thrust upon her.

Cultural Connotations

Food. Some of the stories in *Interpreter of Maladies* are quite suggestive of the nuances of language, customs, food habits and dress, which are an inextricable part of life and represent a culture. For the characters in Lahiri's stories, food metaphorically acts as an agent of connecting with their cultural identity. In the story, "Mrs. Sen's," Eliot observes keenly, how Mrs. Sen chops vegetables, fish and chicken "with great skill, using this uniquely Indian "blade" (Lahiri, 114). This is the only important activity in her daily life, other than keeping her slippers at the entrance of the house and wearing sari and vermillion, that make her feel connected with her culture. Everyday Eliot watches her cook elaborate meals for dinner for only two persons whereas, at his house, it is only "pizza they normally ordered for dinner" (Lahiri, 118).

Another interesting aspect of Mrs. Sen's character is her extreme fondness for fish, which is typically associated with the Bengali culture. She does not miss a chance to explain to Eliot's mother how fish is an integral part of Bengali cuisine. That explains why the only sojourns she makes outside her house with extreme urgency (other than picking up Eliot from the bus stop), is to the fishmongers as soon as she is informed about the availability of the fish of her choice. Eliot found it amusing to watch how happy Mrs. Sen felt when there was news about "fish from the seaside. It was always a whole fish she desired, not shell-fish,

or the fillets […] (Lahiri, 123). She feels "flattered" (Lahiri, 124) when, one day, the man from the fish store calls her after looking up her name in the telephone book, to inform her about the fresh supply of fish.

Lilia's mother, in the story, "When Mr. Pirzada Came to Dine," strictly adheres to different cuisines from Bengal and does not quite appreciate "the peculiar eating habits of […] American coworkers at the bank" (Lahiri, 34). Even during the twelve-day Bangladesh Liberation War, dinner was restricted to only "boiled eggs with rice" (Lahiri, 40), to honour the sentiment of their guest, Mr. Pirzada. Though Lilia's mother seems to be keen on adapting the American way of life, she unknowingly and unconsciously tries to hold on to her roots through her culinarychoices.

In "A Temporary Matter," after Shoba's miscarriage, Shukumar takes up the responsibility of preparing meals "every afternoon" (Lahiri, 7). He started to follow Shoba's "penciled instructions" (7), about the specific proportions of spices for different recipes.in her "cookbooks" (7). Both being second-generation immigrants, who belong to the transnational diaspora, their cultural hybridity is reflected in their assimilation of a blended cuisine. Shukumar silently recalls those days when Shoba was quite passionate about shopping. She used to ensure that their pantry would always be "stocked with extra bottles of olive and corn oil, depending onwhether they were cooking Italian or Indian" (Lahiri, 6).

The Das family, in the "Interpreter of Maladies," though "[B]born and raised" (Lahiri, 45) in America, seems to enjoy Indian snacks at a "roadside restaurant" (Lahiri, 54), on their way to Konarak. Throughout the journey, Mrs, Das savours "puffed rice tossed with peanuts and chilli peppers" from "a large packet made from newspapers" (Lahiri, 46).

In the story, "The Third and Final Continent," Lahiri tries to underline the distinctive cultures of the homeland and the new world, by drawing a contrast between Helen's weekly supply of canned soups for her centenarian mother and the narrator cooking "egg curry" (Lahiri, 191) to welcome his wife, Mala to this new continent. The narrator's preference for having cereal and milk for breakfast speaks of the need to assimilate, to adapt oneself to the new homeland. Later though, as parents, the narrator and his wife made it a point to meet their son every weekend, so that he could "eat rice [...] with his hands," and speak with his parents "in Bengali" (Lahiri, 197), which, they were afraid, their son would give up once they "die" (197). This idea of passing on the tradition to the next generation represents the need of a diasporic community, to preserve its cultural identity, both to recognize and remain connected to its roots.

Language and Customs. The metaphorical use of both language and customs, in Lahiri's stories, are marked with strong cultural connotations. In "A Temporary Matter," Shukumar sadly recalls how Shoba had already done detailed planning to celebrate the first "rice ceremony" (Lahiri, 11) for their expected child. She was very eager to have one of her brothers to "feed the child its first taste of solid food, at six months if it was a boy, seven if it was a girl" (11).

Mrs. Sen explains to Eliot, when he sees her wearing the vermillion, that she "must wear the powder every day" (Lahiri, 117), till the day she remains married. Eliot realizes that it is as significant as wearing "a wedding ring" (117). When he had first noticed the vermillion mark on

Mrs. Sen, Eliot thought it might be a "cut" on "her scalp" (117) or an insect-bite. Soon he also got used to "her curious scent of mothballs and cumin" (117).

Mrs. Sen's accented English was foreign to Eliot's ears, as when she asked him, "Is it Beethoven? […] pronouncing […] not "bay," but "bee," like the insect" (Lahiri, 120). Her appreciation of the "clam cakes" (Lahiri, 129) in a typical Indian diction, when she said, "Like pakoras, no?" (129), did not go unnoticed by Eliot. The Sens, Eliot observed, always spoke in English in his presence. He found it queer that, even while being photographed, they "smiled with their mouths closed" (Lahiri, 130). Eliot, in fact, found it very strange that they neither bothered "to move closer together" nor "hold hands or put their arms around each other's waists"(130).

At Lilia's house, Mr. Pirzada tries to make sense of the American culture when Lilia thanks him for presenting her "an especially spectacular peppermint lollipop […]" (Lahiri, 29). He asks her curiously, "What is this thank-you?" (29) which is heard everywhere in America. He adds humorously that if he is ever "buried in this country," then he would also be "thanked" at his "funeral" (29).

Miranda, an American, curious to learn about Dev's culture, learns "the Bengali alphabet in the Teach Yourself series […] to transcribe the Indian part of her name, "Mira" (Lahiri, 97). On the other hand, though he "had an English-medium education" (Lahiri, 94), Dev admits to Miranda, "how it took him years to be able to follow American accents in movies" (94). The narrator in the last story of the book, also reminds himself of his "first days in London" (Lahiri, 195), when it took him "a whole year" to "decipher" (195) the British accent.

In the final story, "The Third and Final Continent," the narrator gets acquainted with the American culture as he is confronted with contrasting images of the different cultures. Seeing himon his "bare feet" inside the

room, Helen, the landlady's daughter, asks him, "Are you new to Boston?" (Lahiri, 185). Soon she learns that he is "from Calcutta, India" (185) and this is his first visit to "America" (185). After meeting the landlady, Mrs. Croft, he wondered that while his mother gave up on life after his father had passed away, Mrs. Croft, aged one hundred and three years, lives on her own and manages her tenants on strict terms and conditions. When he volunteered to warm the soup for Mrs. Croft for her dinner, her daughter replied that she would never have done that because that was exactly "the sort of thing that would kill her altogether" (Lahiri, 188). Later in the story, when he and Mala went to see Mrs. Croft, they were amazed to learn that she had herself called the police when she broke her "hip" in "the middle of the night!" (Lahiri, 194). She enjoys it thoroughly when the narrator says "Splendid!" (194) to appreciate her daring act. Mrs. Croft's indomitable courage and resilience reminded him how his mother had lost her mental balance after his father's demise. His brother had to give up studies "to work in the jute mill" and "keep the household running" (188) while he would sit by his "mother's feet and study for […] exams" to "keep an eye on her" (188).

Home and Beyond

The myriad tales the characters live through these stories bring forth the subtle intricacies of the diasporic experience --- whether in a geographical land or within the space of a home or even, in the mind. The characters represent the multiple shades of ideologies, adhered to as well as experienced, by the people who inhabit the contemporary diaspora, irrespective of its location. Some still uphold "colonialism's oppressive ideology" (Tyson, 2006, p. 427), like the residents who drive Boori Ma away, or the Haldars, who ill-treat Bibi, while others like Shoba and Miranda, strive towards resisting it by attaining awareness about the self as to the people and the world around them. Some, like Mrs. Sen, try to retain their identity through memories of the homeland whereas others, like Lilia, try to assimilate with the dominant culture while being distinctly awareof her own. Mrs. Croft continually strives to establish the glory of the nation,

she identifies herself with, through her habitual declaration, “There is an American flag on the moon, boy!” (Lahiri, 182). This assures her with a sense of pride and dignity in this increasingly unfamiliar world. The unnamed narrator in “The Third and Final Continent,” symbolizes the sense of pride and “achievement” (Lahiri, 198) in the journey undertaken to re-establish one’s identity --- individual and cultural --- “in this new world” (198) --- the diaspora. The entire gamut of the contemporary diasporic experience, which Lahiri portrays so subtly in her stories, is aptly summed up by the narrator when he encourages his son, saying that if he could “survive on three continents, then there is no obstacle” that his son could not “conquer” (Lahiri, 197-8). Towards the end of the story, the narrator reflects on the journey of his life and thereby, attains a deep understanding of the self. The thought of spending “nearly thirty years” (198) in this unknown “new world” (198), fills him with confidence when he thinks of the astronauts who have made history by spending only a few hours on the “moon” (198).

This profound realization of the narrator resonates with the essence of Hall’s (1989) views on identity as a dynamic entity, which is “constantly producing and reproducing [...] anew, through transformation and difference” (p. 235) in the context of contemporary diaspora.

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