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Home and Homeland in the Narratives of Diasporic South Asian Writers: Jhumpa Lahiri and Bharati Mukherjee

Rim Souissi*

Abstract

A myriad of contemporary writers, especially those appertaining to ethnic diaspora and residing in polyglot countries like the United States and Britain, evince an avid preoccupation with their homelands evident in their narratives. Their novels are partly, if not entirely, set in their motherlands; their characters often journey from the (in)secure premises of their native countries and are immersed headlong in new and somehow alien cultures. The way these characters choose to bolster or sever their links with their homelands reveals a lot about the way they come to conceive of the latter—either as a driving force towards self-fulfillment or a counter-current hampering growth and happiness. This article seeks to explore the notions of home and homeland; their meanings, significance, and various connotations, while addressing the position and perception that two contemporary emergent diasporic writers, namely Jhumpa Lahiri and Bharati Mukherjee, have towards their homeland. It also aims at contextualizing the way one's homeland is perceived, constructed, and represented through fiction, by referring to a set of texts by the aforementioned writers. A comparison between the way Lahiri and Mukherjee conceptualize and reify the notions of home and homeland and depict them in their narratives will also be offered.

Keywords: *home, homeland, ethnic writers, India, diaspora*

Introduction

The world has been witnessing growing, fierce, and crisscrossing waves of immigration, as most citizens of today's globalized world no longer seem to prioritize being settled in their homelands, aiming mostly at hunting better work opportunities and improved life conditions regardless of the cost which, most of the times, warrants them setting down roots in a foreign land. Experiences of deracination and exile have now become the norm rather than the exception and have come to shape identities and dictate survival mechanisms that the exile/immigrant must adopt to acclimatize to the new environment. This article's examination of the notions of home and homeland encompasses two South Asian contemporary

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authors with Indian origins and Western abode—Jhumpa Lahiri and Bharati Mukherjee. The study of these diasporic writers' views of homeland is instrumental in analyzing the concepts of home and homeland as manifested in their fiction. As diasporic writers, Lahiri and Mukherjee maintain in their works the indelible imprint of their homelands' cultural background, suffusing their fictional landscapes with the distinguishing aromas of their ethnic origins that both mark off their writings and endow them with their peculiar and local specificities. This local imprint that colors their writings together with the universal thematic concerns enabled both writers to carve out a niche for their fiction among the worldly-celebrated diasporic writers.

The first part of this article opens with a general definition of home and homeland, including Avtar Brah's and Orhan Pamuk's own understanding of the aforementioned twin notions, which will provide further insights into the meanings and connotations of the multivalent notions in question. The following part deals with the way Jhumpa Lahiri and Bharati Mukherjee perceive and depict the notions of home and homeland in their fiction. The last part offers a comparison between the writers' different conceptions and portrayals of their homeland in their literary works.

1. Home and Homeland: A General Definition

According to *Oxford Dictionary*, "homeland is the country where someone was born or grew up." Linked to the notion of "homeland" are two other concepts: those of "home" and "land." Pertinent to this study are three definitions by *Oxford Dictionary* of the word "home." "Home" is "the place where one lives permanently, especially as a member of a family or household;" "the family or social unit occupying a permanent residence;" or "the district or country where one was born or has settled on a long-term basis." Accordingly, "homeland" and "home" can be loosely used interchangeably, as both terms connote the comfort and security one retrieves from the sense of belonging to a home and/or homeland. "Land," on the other hand, as James Graham aptly avers, "signifies geographical space, an imagined community and property; it is a place to which one can belong, but also that necessarily belongs to somebody" (1). In this sense, "land" wields a material, but also an immaterial significance, since, not only does it furnish one with a

space to inhabit, but it also presents a welcoming and hospitable community to which one belongs. Based on these definitions of the three terms (homeland, home, and land), one can conclude that the three words share entwined meanings, those which are related to one's sense of belonging, origin, community, and cultural background. Hence, everyone is tied to a homeland whether one continues living there of whether one puts down roots in a different country.

In tune with the above-mentioned definitions of the notions of home and homeland is Avtar Brah's own reading of these intertwined terms. In her seminal book, *Cartographies of Diaspora: Contesting Identities,* Brah recounts an anecdote about an interview she had in order to be granted a scholarship to study in the USA. The interviewer's questions about her nationality (whether she considers herself Indian or African) and about the reasons that drove her to leave her home and pursue an education in America led her to the conclusion that

> the 'referent' of 'home' in both questions was qualitatively different. The first question invokes 'home' in the form of a simultaneously floating and rooted signifier. It is an invocation of narratives of the 'nation'. In racialised or nationalist discourses this signifier can become the basis of claims—in the proverbial Powellian sense—that a group settled 'in' a place may not be necessarily 'of' it. . . . Implied in the second question, on the other hand, is an image of 'home' as the site of everyday experience. It is a discourse of locality, the place where feelings of rootedness ensue from the mundane and the unexpected of the daily practice. Home here connotes our networks of family, kin, friends, colleagues and various other "significant others'. It signifies the social and psychic geography of space that is experienced in terms of neighborhood or a home town. That is, a 'community imagined' in most part through daily encounter. This 'home' is a place with which we remain intimate even in moments of intense alienation from it. It is a sense of 'feeling at home'. (4-5)

It follows that the first definition of 'home' staples the geographical space and the sense of belonging to that particular space together through the notion of nationhood which accentuates the purity of the national identity. On the other hand, the second definition aligns home with the more personal and intimate feelings, resulting from one's immediate surroundings, and hence allowing one to safely ensconce himself/ herself in a hospitable and familiar

environment. Combined together, these two definitions yield a more encompassing reading of the concept of 'home.' 'Home,' in this respect, is both the 'extended community,' i.e. the nation, and the 'nuclear community,' i.e., one's immediate environment.

Another definition of home and homeland is put forth by the Nobel laureate, Orhan Pamuk,[1] whereby he associates home and the 'homeness' of home with the beginnings, maintaining that

> [i]t's like you are just a newly-born animal and your tentacles out there registering everything and you take those impressions to your hard disk, and then they stay, and you evaluate, measure the rest of your life with those first impressions. But then there is also the language, the culture, everything that has a resonance, an aura of belonging, a sort of motherly voice, protection, the beginnings of Cartesian Consciousness. Home is your mother, the beginnings, your memories, and also the language. One thing portable about home is language. [He is] aware of the homeness of home when [he is] outside of Turkey.

It follows that, for Pamuk, home is the cradle of life from which springs the foundation that informs and sustains the person's entire outlook on life. Nevertheless, Pamuk expresses his unwillingness to "underline this distinction between home and other places," since, as he maintains, that would entail that the writer is going to take it upon himself to represent home—something which he shies away from. Besides, home for him has a wider and more encompassing definition—one that equates home with the world, wherein humanity exists, so that "there is no home if [one] disregard[s] humanity." In the same vein, he adds that "in [his] motherly home, [he] managed to see all humanity, and that's the wonderful thing about literature." Pamuk's friends, as he further discloses, think that everything that he writes is autobiographical—which he validates to a certain extent, maintaining that "[he] know[s] very little in life—[his] neighbourhood, [his] family, [his] friends"—therefore everything that he writes about is tinged by an autobiographical flavor. Therein lies the "great gift of literature" as the writer depicts it, in a way that

[1] Orhan Pamuk is a Turkish novelist, screenwriter, and professor of Comparative Literature and Writing at Columbia University. The quotes in this section are taken from an interview with the writer in the New Yorker Festival, and are retrieved from https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3VimE5_GKmQ

"you switch it around, then it's not your autobiography, it is humanity's story." This highlights the extent to which the human experience resonates throughout cultures and nations regardless of the person's origins or belongings—something that literature capitalizes on and helps bring to the fore.

The second thing that Pamuk associates home with is authenticity. He explains it thus: "when you are there, you hear these first voices, first sights, first sounds, first smells, that the rest feels a bit fake, phoney." Accordingly, anything that a person acquires, experiences, or is familiar with is primarily determined by and originally springing from his/her home, so that the point of reference that he/she measures the rest of his/her life against becomes his/her home. Pamuk further adds that one should fight against this urge to view everything in light of the dichotomies of authentic and inauthentic because, as he avers,

> if you insist too much on the homeness, originality, authenticity of the earlier smells, earlier recognitions, earlier motherly tenderly feelings, thus judging the rest of your experience as secondary, phoney, not authentic enough, then, again, although you are paying attention to belonging, paying your respects to your mother, your family, or whatever is the beginnings . . . you disregard the humanity of the rest of humanity.

Pamuk's statement evinces a sense of attachment to one's home, but at the same time a readiness to remain open and tolerant enough to acknowledge the homeness of the whole world, as humanity is humanity whether home or abroad. Accordingly, he highlights the urgent need for placing humanity before home. In line with this argument, he further adds that "home is both a challenge to accept and to embrace. It is what feeds us, but we have to be aware of the fact that once we exaggerate it, once we base everything on the homeness of the home, then there is a risk of being a little bit disrespectful for the rest of the human experience." Put differently, cherishing one's homeland, patriotic as it is, should not be a reason for denigrating the rest of the world as being less worthy, and the rest of the human experience as being less authentic.

2. Home and Homeland as Perceived and Constructed by Lahiri and Mukherjee

There is a "tendency to distinguish some diasporic writers as merely 'ethnic' while labeling others as being less parochial because they are 'postcolonial' or 'transnational'" (8), Nalini Iyer maintains in *Other Tongues: Rethinking the Language Debates in India*. Nevertheless, whether being an immigrant with defined ethnic roots, like Mukherjee or a second-generation immigrant, and therefore having a more fluid or "transnational" identity, like Lahiri, both diasporic writers vocalize varying standpoints and perspectives towards the notion of homeland. Of special significance to this study is each writer's relationship with what she perceives as her homeland and the generative "role that [these] diasporic writers play as cultural informants" (Iyer 9) thanks to the representative function their works serve. The converging thematic concerns of these writers encompass and explore "ideas such as nostalgia for a lost land, the lived realities in the new land, the search for home, culture clash, alienation, [and] assimilation" (Iyer 7). Thus, being geographically displaced is not the only common denominator linking these writers; it is also the particular outlook and representation of the notion of homeland that come across in their literature.

2.1. Home and Homeland in Jhumpa Lahiri's Fiction

Jhumpa Lahiri, the Indian-American writer whose novels feature characters with Indian origins, finds in the coalescence between the characters' Indian origins and the American culture a rich seam to mine. Being a second generation immigrant, born in London and raised in America, Jhumpa Lahiri's perception of home and homeland is quite peculiar. She discloses that, during her childhood, she lacked a sense of belonging; feeling estranged and disconnected more than her parents did. The following is her statement to "Writers Unlimited":[2]

> When I was younger, I felt the emptiness, I felt the lack of a homeland, I felt the lack of belonging, I felt the lack of an identity, I felt the lack of a sort of solid ground, and I think that I felt it even more than my mother and father in a way, because, even though they were displaced in the United States, they could get on a plane and go to India and feel at home, and they could go home. They had a

[2] Retrieved from: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=guZo6bwY8l0

> home to go back to, even if they didn't live there anymore, it remains there. Even now, fifty years later, they call it home, they still call it home. But I didn't feel that way when I went anywhere. When I was younger, I was preoccupied by this, and I wanted very badly to be a person with a more concrete sense of belonging somewhere.

Lahiri's sense of dislocation and disconnection, as she puts it, stems from the fluidity of her identity and her shaky sense of rootedness. The writer's lack of a sense of a homeland and its attendant lack of an identity pinpoint the connection between a person's identity and his/her connection to a homeland. She also adds that she has never felt rooted in any place which she can actually call home, revealing that she doesn't "connect [her] home to a sense of a homeland." In other words, Lahiri distinguishes between her native land or roots and her sense of feeling home.

In the same context, "writers," Lahiri contends, "can live without a kind of fixed national identity, because in the end, the human nature is your subject, broadly speaking." Despite Lahiri's kaleidoscopic sense of homeland, together with her fluid sense of identity, her interest in portraying the Indian cultural aspects and identity is rooted in her novels. Even though she dissociates herself from belonging to a specific homeland, her writings are permeated with a latent sense of attachment to India, since the main characters in her novels are either living in India or Indian immigrants. In the same vein, in her review of *Interpreter of Maladies*, Sunanda Mongia argues that "one cannot, in fact, get rid of culture even if one wants to and the risk is not that Lahiri will ever stop being 'Indian': You could take her out of the culture, but never the culture out of her, however may it get mutated" (208). As evidenced in Mongia's statement, one's sense of culture and homeland remains inherently intact inside, whether one chooses to voice it or suppress it.

Lahiri's short-story collection, *Unaccustomed Earth*, contains as epigraph the words of Nathaniel Hawthorne from his novel *The Custom-House*; "Human nature will not flourish, any more than a potato, if it be planted and replanted, for too long a series of generations, in the same worn-out soil. My children have had other birthplaces, and, so far as their fortunes may be within my control, shall strike their roots into unaccustomed earth." This quote concurs with Lahiri's belief in the enormous richness and liberating power

inherent in leaving one's homeland and putting down roots in a new soil and more fertile grounds. In this sense, home is no longer "where [she] come[s] from," as she explains,[3] but rather "where [she is] with [her] children, [her] husband, and [her] desk." She also declares that this gained sense of freedom allows her to feel home whether she is in Rome or any other place.

What comes across in her works is a sense of exploration of the relationship between one's sense of rootedness and ties with a homeland and the ensuing feelings of disconnection, displacement, uprootedness, and lack of belonging that accompany immigration and the new life in a foreign land. These are the very same feelings that the writer herself experienced throughout her childhood as the daughter of Indian immigrants. On the other hand, not all the characters in her novels or short stories display this unwillingness to slough off their connection and loyalty to their homeland. A case in point is Lahiri's collection of short stories, *The Interpreter of Maladies*, which features second-generation immigrant characters such as Mr. and Mrs. Das, who are born and brought up in the United States and are perfectly assimilated into the mainstream of American life. The Das's family returns to India as tourists, talking and behaving like ones. Their tourist guide and driver, Mr. Kapasi, finds their comportment strange and asks Mr. Das whether they left India when they were young. The latter announces "with an air of sudden confidence" that they were born and raised in America (*The Interpreter of Maladies* 21). The Das's espousal of the American lifestyle and culture together with their pride of belonging to a Western country testify to their ability to reconcile their original Indian identity with the new American culture, which enables them to find their bearings and provides them with a survival mechanism. Their homeland is now looked upon as an exotic place, perceived from the lenses of tourist-like second-generation immigrants.

Contrary to the Das's, the Gangulis in *The Namesake* find it hard to assimilate entirely into the American culture, thereby keeping their connection with their homeland intact and strong. "In America, they retreat into the safety of their Indian community" (9), Mandira Sen explains, echoing what Lahiri terms as "a community

[3] Retrieved from: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=guZo6bwY8l0

of disconnected people",[4] as a reference to the Indian diaspora in America, who find in the act of reuniting with their fellow compatriots respite and solace. What unites this miniature Indian community is their cultural identity—an identity that Mounir Guirat describes, in his *"Being" and "Becoming" in contemporary Diasporic Fiction: Bharati Mukherjee's Jasmine and Monika Ali's Brick Lane*, as

> a normalising framework that allows the individuals to merge together and form the collective 'one true self'. Individuality cedes space and rights to collectivity, resulting in a culturally-constructed identity with clear and homogeneous parameters of reference. Individuals, thus, become obliterated or rather reshaped as disciplined members of a community that defines itself in terms of sameness, oneness, and sharing. "Shared history," roots, as well as the same cultural values are the parameters that define the contours of what is seen as one community. (47)

It follows that, though away from their homeland, these community members are able to ease off their estrangement by engaging into and submerging their newly imposed status of "immigrants" by what can be termed as "ritualistic practices." These ritualistic practices, manifested for instance in the weekly unions that involve cooking Indian meals and gossiping about other Indian immigrants, are meant to keep alive a piece of their homeland and to ceremonially commemorate their customs, roots, and "shared history." The equivocal concept of "shared history" requires further attention. Whether this shared history refers to the immigrants' past in their homelands or to their communal experience as immigrants, it furnishes them with a sense of belonging to the same provenance. The words of Joanne Harumi Sechi, the Japanese American author, are of special relevance to this particular context, as she states, describing the way she feels about her cultural difference in America, "I was made to feel that cultural pride would justify and make good my difference in skin colour while it was a constant reminder that I was different" (qtd. in Ashcroft et al. 267). Sechi's statement reveals one of the factors that unite the immigrants apart from their "shared history"—their "cultural pride," which, at the same time, sets them apart from the rest of the American mainstream and justifies their 'sought seclusion.' Hence, their "shared history,"

[4] Retrieved from: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=guZo6bwY8l0

together with their "cultural pride," differentiates them from the people of the host country and demarcates their identity.

In *Unaccustomed Earth*, though the immigrant characters maintain their connections with their homeland, they are able to acquire a sense of liberating dissociation from India, which enables them to start the process of assimilation into the host culture. This is particularly relevant for the second-generation immigrants. Gogol or, as he chooses to name himself, Nikhil, in *The Namesake*, dwells in the uneasy in-betweeness of his parents' attachment to the Indian culture and the drifting flow of the American lifestyle. This calls into mind the writer's own experience as a second-generation Indian immigrant and her feelings of residing between the interstices of two cultures.

Never entirely identifying oneself with a specific culture or background, never fully getting one's grip on one's roots or understanding one's affiliations, the second-generation immigrant has ambivalent feelings towards the notion of the homeland. This raises the question of whether "being torn asunder between two worlds, the one left behind, the one sought, heighten[s] a consciousness of loss and death, as the fragments of existence do not quite come together" (29), as Mandira Sen opines, or whether it offers a new chance of regeneration and a fresh start, free from the burden(s) that one's native culture and/or ethnicity pose(s), preventing the submersion of the immigrant's ethnic background, thereby halting his/her attempts at pitching in with the American community. Therefore, the immigrants' experiences in the host country and their tentative attempts at locating themselves and defining their (new) identities within this new environment is determined, to a large extent, by the way they perceive their homelands.

Embracing the new environment as one's own and assimilating into the American mainstream are largely determined by the extent to which immigrants are willing to sever their emotional ties with their homelands and journey away from the past and an old self towards a new future and a reborn self. Bharati Mukherjee asserts that this act of transformation,[5] this act of "making oneself over as

[5] Retrieved from: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=q02OsKJqzEo

an American requires a kind of murder of the self, a slaughter of the old self." Her statement strongly resonates with that of her protagonist in *Jasmine*, who, in a moment of introspection, concludes that "[w]e murder who we were so we can rebirth ourselves in the images of dreams" (29). In other words, to kick-start the process of rebirth, regeneration, and moulding one's new identity, the immigrant has to forcefully shed his/her old self and, with it, the feelings of nostalgia towards the homeland to which, in that case, the immigrant ceases to belong. Mukherjee reasons that "there is nothing benevolent or painless about that transformation" (ibid). Behind this assertion lie Mukherjee's different perceptions of the notions and negotiations of home and homeland and their relationship with the Indian immigrants.

2.2. Bharati Mukherjee's Depiction of Home and Homeland in her Fiction

As she declares in an interview at Litquake,[6] Bharati Mukherjee's interest has always resided in exploring "what . . . home mean[s]; where . . . we find it; [whether] it [is] about a nation, a state that we left behind, or the one we've adopted, or mother tongue or religion or culture." Her statement links the notions of home and homeland to a set of defining characteristics, including the geographical space, be it the country where one was born, or the one an immigrant claims to be his (new) home; language; religion; and cultural background or cultural aspirations, in case the immigrant disavows his/her cultural heritage and/or identity. Being a naturalized American, Bharati Mukherjee chooses to argue against the hyphenated position that Indian immigrants are forced to maintain in America. She declares that she does not consider herself as an Indian-American writer,[7] but rather as an American one. Her aim, as she further notes, is "to expand the centre, rather than create this little grid of white people or African-American writers in the centre and everyone else on the periphery." Put differently, Mukherjee aspires to claim her right of being perceived as a fully-American citizen, and not to be bracketed within the narrow confines of a marginalized ethnic immigrant group. It is to sensitize against this "unconsciously racist impulse," as Mukherjee terms it, inducing people to pin labels on immigrants,

[6] Retrieved from: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yhck7nBbkUE
[7] Retrieved from: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=q02OsKJqzEo

thereby driving a wedge between the two communities and depriving the immigrant community from fusing with the American one. In this respect, Guirat states that Mukherjee "asserts that the immigrant has the right to enjoy the richness and fertility of the American space. That is why she defends Americanness and questions multiculturalism as detrimental to the stereotyped ethnic groups who want to live free from their past cultural values" (11). It follows that stripping off one's cultural identity is the pre-requisite, in Mukherjee's view, of full integration and Americanization, which should be approved and validated by the adoptive culture.

Mukherjee's fictional landscapes are mainly populated with female characters, forced or earnest to leave their homeland in search for better life prospects. Mukherjee is perceived as a feminist writer who militates against marginalization, be it gender-related (exploring the challenges that Indian women face in a culture that has more reverence for customs and more respect for men than it has for women) or identity-related (broaching the broader sense of human identity when one "flutter[s] between [two] worlds";[8] the homeland and the host country). Quoting Ketu Katrak, Nalini Iyer notes that, unlike Lahiri's "'ethno-global' identity" which "transcends narrow nationalism" but "celebrates an ethnic heritage along with evoking an exemplary universalist humanism," Mukherjee "erases ethnic identity by refusing a hyphenated label" (9). Despite her endeavours to become fully "American," choosing India to set her fictional works is notably significant in the sense that it demonstrates the writer's rooted interest in her country of origin. Mukherjee's novels, mainly *Jasmine*, *Miss New India*, *The Tree Bride*, and *Desirable Daughters*, lay bare the writer's perception of the multifaceted cultural, social, and even historical aspects of India. Emphasis will be put on *Jasmine* and *Miss New India,* whose respective protagonists, Jasmine and Anjali, set off on a journey looking for better prospects away from the restrictions, they think, their homeland poses.

2.2.1. *Jasmine*

In *Jasmine*, Mukherjee zooms in on what she portrays as Indian obsolete customs and traditions, bringing into light much of the

[8] Taken from Mukherjee's *The Management of Grief*.

cultural aspects of the rural Hasnapur, a village in Punjab, thereby, epitomizing Indian culture and social norms in general. The novel traces the protagonist's journey as she "reposition[s] the stars" (*Jasmine* 240) of her fate, eventually proving the astrologer's predictions of her doomed future wrong. "[B]orn eighteen years after the Partition Riots," Jyoti's "whole world was the village of Hasnapur" (*Jasmine* 44). Jasmine is brought up in a community that believes in "ghosts and spirits [that take] over in the dark," in a desolate village full of mud huts where there is no electricity, and in a culture that perceives "bright ladies" to be the ones "bearing bright sons" (*Jasmine* 51). Jasmine's homeland, therefore, transforms into a stifling environment that threatens to drown her subjectivity, reducing and imprisoning her into the role of "a village girl [who is] brought up to be caring and [has] no voice of her own" (*Jasmine* 46).

Because the then Indian mindset perceives "village girls [as] cattle; whichever way you lead them, that is the way they will go" (ibid), and because the Indian culture, which is depicted as prescriptively biased, values male dominance and female docility, Jasmine no longer holds her homeland to be a hospitable and a suitable environment for the development of her potentials as an individual. She rather looks askance at her future as a widow in India, since her new marital status will nip her dreams in the bud and mould her into someone "she know[s] [she doesn't] want to become" (*Jasmine* 2). Expectantly, she seeks more freedom and more promising opportunities across the borders. Once in America, she displays a readiness to abandon her Indian roots, never hesitating to dispense with her "sari," or "tika" and to replace them with a "T-shirt, tight cords, and running shoes" (*Jasmine* 133). Thus, Jasmine's disassociation from her Indian origins and reconstruction of a new identity enable her to lay the foundation for a comfortable life in America. Differently put, severing herself from her "Indianness" was a pre-requisite for Jasmine to fully redefine her identity and reposition herself in America.

Unlike the Vadheras who, despite residing in America, still abide by the Indian customs and act according to the Indian culture, Jasmine realizes the obsolescence of preserving and acting upon one's own culture in a country where the "exotic" and the "alien" are looked at with fascination, and where difference and variety are the twin forces that make for the beat of the nation. Hence, what is

foregrounded is the stark contrast between Jasmine who is willing to sacrifice her Indian identity in exchange for becoming fully American and the Vadheras who seek to preserve and perpetuate the Indian customs and traditions. Aligned with this idea is Guirat's statement:

> They are very much attached to their cultural patterns to the extent that they remain opaque to any possible interaction with the host culture. The microcosmic India they inhabit is constructed through a collective sharing of what India has given them: Indian cultural purity. This allows them to protect themselves from any possible external intervention that could dilute their purity and weaken their fixed understanding of belonging. (94)

The Vadheras are armed with their staunch patriotic fervor which, they think, is so sacred that it should not be tampered with or endangered by being contaminated by any dialogic interaction with the host country. The Indian lifestyle is maintained in America, and it is best illustrated in terms of Professorji and his young bride Nirmala. They follow "an ancient prescription for marital accord: silence, order, [and] authority" which beget "submission, beauty, [and] innocence" (*Jasmine* 151). This "Indian recipe" for a successful marriage accounts for the couple's alienation from each other, and for Professorji's secret identity. Professorji and Nirmala's relationship stands in stark opposition to the one Jasmine and Prakash once had. Furthermore, Nirmala's refusal to part with her sari (the traditional Indian female outfit) and her maintenance of the orthodox, passive, and pliant attitude towards her husband are conversely met with Jasmine's striving to assimilate into the American culture and her attempt to accomplish her "genetic" transformation (*Jasmine* 222) into an American individual.

Jasmine's attempt to learn how to "walk and talk American" (*Jasmine* 134) is, as Cristina Emanuela Dascalu puts it in her book, *Imaginary Homelands of Writers in Exile; Salman Rushdie, Bharati Mukherjee and V.S. Naipaul*, "an act of mimicry," consisting in "taking part in the host culture, trying to become a member of a culture of which the exile is not a native" (13). Differently put, by mimicking how Americans do things, Jasmine aims at showing willingness and readiness to assimilate to the new culture. While her attempted transformation, as well as her willingness to do without her "Indianness," aims at setting down roots anew in a more

promising environment, it is perceived "as treacherous by nationalists" (ibid). In this case, Professorji and Nirmala are the ones who resist this transformation and deem it "treacherous." Therefore, Jasmine risks the dissolution of her previous identity by undergoing, what Dascula terms as, a "trajectory of formation" that includes "making, re-making, [and] fracturing" her subjectivity. Dascula further stresses that the subjectivity of the exile is never static but is rather "one of motion, of becoming but never reaching the certainty of having become" (13). Dascula's statement is best illustrated by the character of Jasmine—always shifting, always shedding her previous persona and embracing a new one pursuant to the situation she finds herself in. Concurring with this is Arianna Dagnino's suggestion in her book, *Transcultural Writers and Novels in the Age of Global Mobility*, that it is as though one is "now constituted by a complex agglomeration of latent selves, waiting to emerge and to be expressed at the right time and in the right context" (110).

Joyoti leaves her homeland and, with it, her past life and identity, and journeys to America to become Jasmine, cutting, in the process, her ties to India. In the same vein, Guirat states that Jasmine's "homeland is denigrated and relegated to oblivion and forgetfulness, while the American culture is praised, desired, and sought" (108). This is because the protagonist's homeland is associated with "experiences of domination and passivity" (Guirat 167), which haunt the protagonist and drive her to extricate herself from her past identity. She, as a result, "breaks with her cultural origin and divests herself of all the cultural values and principles which remind her of the motherland" (Guirat 168). Jasmine never shows any homesickness, nor does she display nostalgia for her "past life in the mother country and her desire to erase all traces of her original belonging are in part due to her lack of any awareness of nationalistic causes or feeling of fellowship with her likes at home or any sense of loyalty to her homeland and people" (Guirat 107). This means that she attempts to burn all the bridges between herself and her homeland, preferring not to be reminded of her life there.

Du, her adopted Vietnamese son, on the other hand, ascertains that he keeps intact his bonds with the Vietnamese diasporic community in America. His will to nourish and act upon his sense of nostalgia for his homeland can be explained by his desire to create and maintain a sense of belonging with his countrymen, in an attempt to

(re)create a miniature homeland. Du's endeavor to reconstruct the remnants of a lost territory with which a bygone experience and identity are associated proves that he cherishes his homeland and his experience there. This contradicts with Jasmine's notion of experience which, she thinks, "must be forgotten, or else it will kill" (*Jasmine* 33). Homeland, therefore, has varying associations for each character, and these associations (whether positive or negative) determine, to a large extent, the individual's feelings towards his/her homeland. For Jasmine, her homeland is a place that can rob her of her identity and autonomy; therefore she aims at distancing herself from it. She is also willing to adopt America as her new "foster" homeland and to imbibe the American culture as a "surrogate" for the Indian one. This also holds true for the protagonist of Mukherjee's *Miss New India*.

2.2.2. *Miss New India*

Miss New India features yet another earnest young woman determined to chart her own future by herself and to make her dreams come to fruition in a new and a more hospitable environment. Like Jasmine, Anjali Bose (also referred to as Angie), flees the clutches of a rural Indian backwater towards a more open, progressive, and promising "land." Unlike Jasmine, however, Angie's "promised land" is not America, but rather "New India" (used to refer to Bangalore). Nevertheless, both females' tickets to acceptance and success are dependent on learning and mastering how to "walk and talk American" (*Jasmine* 134). Jasmine enthuses over her new life and her freshly acquired identity in America, which makes her transformation and acclimatization to the American lifestyle genetic. Angie, on the other hand, without leaving the premises of her homeland, finds in the rich nuances of Bangalore—"New India"—a long-awaited opportunity to flee her doomed arranged marriage.

Heeding the warning of her American teacher "that India's leaving towns like [Gauripur] in the dust" (*Miss New India* 13), Miss New India starts visualizing a brighter future for herself outside the familial, cultural, and economic confines of her immutably traditional hometown. Shunning marriage and "want[ing] something exciting, life changing, to save her from the tedium of Gauripur" (*Miss New India* 15), Angie is all the more spurred by Champion's

enticing motivations. Comparing and contrasting her actual life in Gauripur with the more promising one in Bangalore—the former being ruled by "family honour and fatherly duty" and decreeing "shackling her to a stranger" (*Miss New India* 13) and the latter being a beehive for "the new people" like herself (*Miss New India* 15)—Angie sets her mind to break free from the constraints of place and traditions and to set off for an adventure in "New India."

Through Angie's lenses, Mukherjee zooms in on the Indian mindset, upon which customs and traditions are founded. Like Hasnapur in *Jasmine*, Gauripur in *Miss New India* is governed by a set of rules and customary regulations, revolving around women's status, role, duties, and freedom. "In the heavily chaperoned world of the arranged marriage market" (*Miss New India* 18), a woman loses her autonomy and self-will and becomes a pawn in the game of matchmaking. Finding a suitable suitor for one's daughter is revered as a fatherly duty and striking a good deal in the game of arranging marriages is considered a familial priority. Furthermore, education for women becomes marginalized for the sake of "groom hunting," and, even after marriage, the skills that a woman acquired thanks to her education are turned to good account, "if any misfortune was to befall her mythical husband" (*Miss New India* 18). Anjali, however, "was tuned in to her culture's consolations for the denial of autonomy" (*Miss New India* 18). That is why she opts for breaking the shackles of family, culture, and traditions, before having her subjectivity broken by them.

Hence, Angie's hometown backwardness becomes the catalyst that sets her off on her journey. Mukherjee sheds light on the disparities between the two cities, Gauripur and Bangalore, depicting the sea-changes that the latter underwent, which render it the Silicon Valley of India and its most developed metropolis. While Angie's hometown still lags behind, impervious to the changes brought about by globalization, Bangalore becomes the epicenter of the latest fads and crazes and the metropolis that attracts hankerers after success. Anjie is one of the people who are drawn to this centre of attraction and are willing to venture and expand their horizons there.

Shortly upon her arrival to Bangalore, Angie's "self- image as a modest, well-brought-up, small-town, middle-class probasi Bengali girl" has forever changed into "someone entirely different, and now

"[she]'ll never be that person again" (*Miss New India* 130). Escaping Gauripur, leaving a disgraced family behind, and turning a blind eye to traditions, Angie drives her father to commit suicide. Out of shame and "self-respect" (*Miss New India* 148), he takes his own life so that he would not have to contend with the usual finger-pointing subsequent to a shameful scandal in the rural Bihar. Hence, India, in *Miss New India* as in *Jasmine*, is depicted as being ruled and regulated by customs and concepts, most important among which is family honor, hence, any disgrace brought about by a member of any family will wreak havoc upon the entire family. Such culture, as well as environment, induces female docility, obedience, and passivity. Angie's new environment, on the other hand, warrants a bolder personality and a new identity. Subsequent to her liaison with Mr. GG, Angie starts perceiving herself as "quite a woman . . . hot, according to Tookie. Secretive and oh so mysterious, according to Husseina. Sherbet-cool, sherbet-refreshing, according to Moni. And funny and fascinating" according to Mr. GG (*Miss New India* 131). This suggests that Anjie's construction of her self- image is determined by and subject to other people's opinions about her, and does not spring from her own self-judgment.

Her transformation into "a woman" is not enough for her to beat a path through Bangalore and achieve her "genetic" transformation as Jasmine does. Her host environment is governed by different rules, and her past identity, she believes, must be shed in order for her to fit in, imbibe the new culture of "New India," and be able to find a job as a call agent. However, as her monitor complains, Angie (or as she was instructed to identify herself to her clients—Janey), is neither able "to submerge [her] identity," nor "[erase herself] from the call" (*Miss new India* 138). After her disappointing experience in Bangalore, Angie feels that she has lost her identity. Working at a call centre dictates that she poses as an American agent and imitate the American accent—something that she fails to do, finding it hard to embrace a new identity. On more than one occasion, she states that she doesn't "even have a name anymore" (*Miss New India* 153). She floats between two selves, two identities—the one she sought to shed by escaping Gauripur, which is lost forever, and the other she aspires to acquire by moving to Bangalore, and which she never really comes to possess. Of special relevance to the identity crisis that Anjie undergoes is Dascalu's statement that Mukherjee

> align[s] the subjectivity of her characters with the passage of their bodies through the world, demonstrating a central concern for not just the internal motion of subjectivity, but also the interrelation of the subject to the world. Not only this, but the ideas that we have seen cause the dissolution of the self—those ideas of roles, stereotypes, the process of mimicry—are all linked . . . with the notion of a landscape or geographical place. (14)

This emphasizes the determining role that the spatial setting plays in the formation, transformation, destruction and/or reconstruction of the character's subjectivity. Since each place/world the character inhabits is chartered by different set of rules, the roles that the character should adopt vary accordingly. Anjali feels that India—be it the Old India (Gauripur) or the New India (Bangalore)—is inhospitable to her. While the Old India is, for her, a "desert that she remembered and had been describing," her stay at the New India is considered as "eight months' exile" (*Miss New India* 186). Mukherjee highlights Anjali's estrangement in her own homeland, feeling stranded between the two extremities (a backwater versus a metropolis), and unable to fully come to terms with the environment she inhabits.

Though Anjali does not leave her homeland per se, she qualifies for the status of an exile in the way her homeland becomes a form of a foreign territory for her within which she becomes an immigrant, regarding the discomfiture and the concomitant identity crisis she experiences. Her new "home" does not come with a secure sense of identity. In fact, neither homes (Old India or New India) feel like "home" to Angie—noting that "home," in this sense, is supposed to furnish her with a space where her potentials can develop and where she can fully come to terms with her identity. In other words, because Angie is gradually distancing herself from the tightening stranglehold of her former "home," shrugging off in the process her past identity, and because she cannot attain the status she aspires to fulfill and therefore maintains a dented identity, she is consigned to this uncomfortable zone—the space between the two stools.

Only subsequent to her return to Gauripur after spending eight months in Bangalore does Anjali start to notice the transformations that her hometown underwent. This bears out the fact that India is not immutable in the face of changes but rather, as Peter Champion confidently asserts, "India is starting to wake up. India is a giant still

in its bed, but beginning to stir. . . . India is catching fire" (*Miss New India* 9). In fact, Mukherjee portrays India from the vantage point of a native Indian (Anjali), nonetheless, through Peter's own perception of India, a different and a more piercing viewpoint transpires. Through a foreigner's eyes, whose capability to detect, record, and enthuse over "his eccentric history of modern India" (*Miss New India* 9), India ceases to be a third-world country, despite all "its bribery, assassinations, race riots and corruption" (*Miss New India* 8). Though an American, Peter could distil what he perceives to be the enchanting spirit of India—a spirit that enthralls him and makes him unable to leave, thus adopting India as his "surrogate" homeland, and paving the way for his acculturation.

Peter's perception of India as an exotic and rich country, together with Anjalie's viewpoint towards her homeland—being, at once, a stifling current that holds her from progressing and a passageway towards self-fulfilment—makes Mukherjee's depiction of India multifaceted and encompassing. From a foreigner's vantage point and from a local girl's outlook, Mukherjee manages to present a more objective vision/version of India.

2.2.3. Comparison Between Lahiri's and Mukherjee's Depiction of Home and Homeland

India in Lahiri and Mukherjee's painted fictional landscapes is either depicted as the starting point of a journey or as the anchor that binds characters and keeps them tied to their roots. Emphasis in their novels is put on the characters' trajectories which, as Dascalu maintains, take the form of "a journey or pilgrimage," with the "narratives stand[ing] as allegorical representations that double as both the road the individual travels on and an image of a passage of the individual caught in the ceaseless transformation of the self" (13). This means that, in tandem with the characters' physical journeys from their homelands to the host country, they undertake another journey which amounts to a self-discovery journey in which they never cease to change, invent and reinvent themselves, pursuant to the exigencies of the situation.

Characters in both women writers' fiction, being either first generation immigrants or second generation immigrants, always have a connection with India—be it strong and positive or withering and unpleasant. Lahiri and Mukherjee capitalize on the link between

characters and their homelands and highlight, in this respect, the extent to which this link determines the path a character takes, the journey he/she undertakes, and the transformations he/she undergoes. The vestige of the exile's former life is partly marked and colored by the way he/she perceives his/her homeland. Accordingly, if the previous life he/she led was pleasant and fulfilling, then he/she will make sure to cherish his/her memories through the maintenance of his/her ties with his/her homeland. This can be illustrated by the Gangulis in *The Namesake* together with the Indian couple (Professorji and Nirmala) in *Jasmine*, in the way they refuse to dispense with their cultural and ethnic heritage. On the other hand, if the memories the exile has of his/her former life are unpleasant and associated with traumatic experiences, the exile will not only seek to bury these memories, but will also aim at acquiring a new identity whereby he/she can disassociate himself/herself from his/herself homeland and opt for full integration within the host culture. Jasmine and the way she "rebirths" herself, together with Angie and the way she endeavors to recreate a new identity, testifies to this process of distancing oneself from one's homeland through amputating one's ties with it, even if that includes the identity that one once had and which he/ she now finds tantamount to self-effacement.

Though India per se is only present in the fiction of Lahiri and Mukherjee so as to set the stage for the characters' journeys, one can still garner a portrait of the country's culture, customs, and traditions. Such a portrait delineates the elements that push the characters to act, react, and hence evolve. The characters' homelands serve to kick-start their journeys of self-discovery, since they feel straitjacketed by their homelands' prescriptive rules. In fact, the way they feel within their homelands amounts to the feelings of an exile, in the sense that they are aware of their estrangement, dissatisfaction with the status quo, and alienation from their environments. Nonetheless, the portrait of India that both women writers endeavor to paint, though positioned as a backdrop for the main story, still serves to bring about a vision/version of the country. As Salman Rushdie puts it in his "*Imaginary Homelands*"; "my India was just that: 'my' India, a version and no more than one version of all the hundreds of millions of possible versions. I tried to make it as imaginatively true as I could, but imaginative truth is simultaneously

honourable and suspect" (10). Differently put, Rushdie contends that his depiction of his homeland is just a vision/version, or construction among many others pertaining to other writers. Rushdie's "*Imaginary Homelands*" can be read as the writer's stance towards the concept of writing about one's homeland, though one no longer resides there. He contends that a writer in exile can still write about his/her homeland by means of reconstructing his memories, stressing the fact that writers are liable to memory defects and subjective viewpoints. Nonetheless, this should not deter them from finding a voice attuned to the throbbing heart of their homelands. Accordingly, each writer whose preoccupation is (re)constructing a portrait of his/her homeland is just presenting his/her own imaginative vision of the latter. Hence, as Rushdie avers, the "imaginative truth" inherent in the presentation of each writer's homeland and which the former invests in his/her fiction, though imaginative, is permeated by an endeavor to mirror the truth, the realities, a slice of life, so to speak (ibid).

Conclusion

To conclude, as contemporary emergent ethnic writers, Lahiri and Mukherjee can be said to share a preoccupation with the notions of home, homeland, and the negotiations of both space and identity. While as a second generation immigrant, Lahiri possesses a fluid sense of belonging to a particular homeland, Mukherjee displays a more defined sense of origin/homeland and a more precise prescription to the sought-after American identity. In both female writers' fictions, notions of identity, homeland, home, belonging, and estrangement are laid bare and experimented with, depicting the extent to which a person's roots can define and inform his/her routes. The Indian homeland is set as a backdrop; the Indian culture is placed at the forefront; the negotiations between the Indian identity and the characters self-orchestrated vision of themselves form the crux that animates the writers' fictions. The protagonists' homeland becomes at once a restricting straightjacket and a driving force in the way it respectively hampers characters' attainment of their dreams and, at the same time, gives them enough incentives to seek opportunities elsewhere. In a world whose porous borders are getting more and more blurry, where voluntary/ forced displacement and the yearning to belong never cease to coexist, Mukherjee and

Lahiri's characters represent nowadays' cosmopolitan citizens with their journeys, struggles, and aspirations.

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