Exploring Cultural Identity in Jhumpa Lahiri's Interpreter of Maladies and The Namesake, and Kiran Desai's The Inheritance of Loss

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Fig 1. Humphries, Amy. Image. 2018.

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Contents

Introduction

In the novels and short stories written by Jhumpa Lahiri and Kiran Desai, the characters have to go through a complicated process of identity formation, due to migration and India's postcolonial status. Their journeys often take them from one former British colony to another. In order to draw attention to this process of identity formation, Jhumpa Lahiri and Kiran Desai employ different narrative techniques to highlight the complex and multifaceted nature of cultural identity as created by their migrant experiences or postcolonial status. Whereas Desai's novel highlights the postcolonial structure of its characters' identities, Lahiri's novel focuses on the concept of *diaspora identities*, as defined by Stuart Hall; her short stories, on the other hand, centre around the interplay between social and personal identities, as put forward by Margarita Azmitia. This thesis sets out to explore where this complexity comes from and whether the authors offer any solutions for the issues that they address in relation to cultural identity.

It is relevant to look at the ways in which these writers approach cultural identity and how they deal with the complexity of this phenomenon, as many people around us today are faced with similar identity issues due to globalisation and migration, myself including. My mother's migration background has had a lasting effect on both her own cultural identity, as well as my own as a second-generation migrant. Like many of the characters in the authors' works, I have asked myself, on numerous occasions, who I am. Am I Dutch, am I Sri Lankan, am I Tamil, or a mix of all these things? Depending on the situation I find myself in, the way I think of myself changes. Similarly, the way people perceive me changes. The issues and difficulties addressed in this thesis are, thus, to a certain extent, recognisable to me and my family and show that cultural identity is a topic worth exploring. Even for those whose cultural identity is not under negotiation, gaining awareness of the process that others go through, can help us understand the world and the people around us a lot better.

According to Jullien, there is no such thing as a cultural identity, because transformation lies at its heart (34). He argues that "culture by its nature mutates and transforms" (34). He also notes that cultures "elucidate each other, simultaneously, through their divide, each coming to a greater understanding of itself through the other, in their face-off" (Jullien 35). Thus, Jullien does not necessarily argue that there is no such thing as a cultural identity, which would be an oversimplification of a phenomenon that has been studied by many over the years, but, instead, argues, like many other scholars, that cultural identity is fluid and that cultural values become more prominent when they are set alongside another culture. This is exemplified by the migration that takes place in the literary works that will be discussed in this thesis. The characters are confronted with new cultural values and, as a result, have to adapt and transform their own cultural identity in order to find a sense of belonging. In that respect, it is impossible to speak of a cultural identity that is unchanging and homogenous.

This thesis, therefore, argues that Lahiri and Desai's works centre around the protean nature of cultural identity, but each in their own way. In order to ground my analysis in a theoretical framework, I first provide a theoretical chapter in which I explain each of the theories and ideas used throughout the chapters. Hereafter, I analyse Jhumpa Lahiri's *Interpreter of Maladies* (1999), a collection of short stories dealing with the immigration experiences of numerous characters. As short stories often focus on personal memories and experiences, this thesis argues that Jhumpa Lahiri uses these short stories to address the interplay between social and personal identities. The first builds on the idea of culture as based on "shared narratives about ancestral and historical experiences, symbols, and worldviews" (Azmitia 1), whereas the latter focuses on how an individual's personal narrative and their environment influence their sense of belonging. Without a social identity, there can be no personal identity and vice versa. The interplay between these two types of identity then allows for a dynamic view of cultural identity, rather than seeing it as something static, as Azmitia

essentially argues that identity can be negotiated and adapted. When identity is negotiated and adapted due to a changing environment, it becomes, what Azmitia calls, a personal identity. A social identity can change, but only on a much larger scale, while a personal identity, as the name suggests, has an impact on the life of an individual and its direct environment. This chapter mainly focuses on gender differences, as they show that personal identities distinguish themselves from social identities and provide an insight into the adaptability of a cultural identity.

The next chapter focuses on Jhumpa Lahiri's novel, *The Namesake* (2003), in relation to the idea of *diaspora identities* as defined by Stuart Hall. Hall argues that these diaspora identities are "constantly producing and reproducing themselves anew, through transformation and difference" (235). This notion of *difference* focuses on how we are positioned by others and how we position ourselves "within the narratives of the past" (Hall 225). As Lahiri's novel allows her to present a more complete picture of the identity development of several of her characters, it also becomes clear that there are differences in the diaspora identities of first- and second-generation migrants. The novel elucidates that both first- and second-generation migrants are positioned and that their identities can change, while stressing that second-generation migrants are confronted with a more challenging task of finding their sense of identity, as they no longer have the same direct ties to India as their parents and are constantly mislabelled and misunderstood.

Lastly, this thesis argues that Kiran Desai's novel, *The Inheritance of Loss* (2006), centres around the postcolonial structure of identity. This novel is mostly set in India and, as such, differs from the other two literary works written by Jhumpa Lahiri. Desai's narrative focuses on the disruptive impact of both the British colonisation and its aftermath after India's independence in 1947. The characters in this novel all deal with this new situation in a different manner and, as such, the novel provides a broad perspective on cultural identity as shaped by

shifting power relations. In addition, the novel shows that, even after India's independence, the colonial presence can still be felt and that new narratives may not be so easily written. The negative effects of (post-)colonialism are, however, more prominently felt by the lower social classes. The way in which it influences their cultural identity, therefore, differs too. In terms of theory, I employ Homi Bhabha's theory on mimicry, as well as some theory about globalisation and cosmopolitanism.

In short, this thesis argues that cultural identity is a complex and multifaceted concept which is highlighted by each of the literary works that will be discussed. The way in which these works approach this task, varies. In spite of this variation, the novels and the short story collection highlight the fact that cultural identity is ever-changing and adaptable and indicate this by respectively focussing on gender norms, generational differences, and social stratification.

Chapter 1

A Theoretical Exploration of Cultural Identity

In this chapter, I provide an elucidation of the main theories that I make use of throughout the chapters in order to discuss cultural identity. The theories that I apply are Margarita Azmitia's theory on social and personal identity, Stuart Hall's ideas about cultural identity and diaspora, and, lastly, I discuss the effects of (post-)colonialism on cultural identity by focussing on mimicry, social stratification, and globalisation. The theories explained below serve to exemplify the difficulty of giving one working definition of cultural identity, because of its complex nature, whereas the conclusion at the end of this thesis highlights the common ground found throughout the chapters in terms of cultural identity.

1.1 Identity Development from a Cultural Perspective: Social and Personal Identity

The aim of Azmitia's theory is to approach developmental psychology from a cultural perspective and to show that culture is dynamic, rather than static. Therefore, she argues that

> [c]ulture embodies meanings, practices, and shared narratives about ancestral and historical experiences, symbols, and worldviews that are passed down through enculturation and change over time as children, adolescents, and adults develop personal relationships and adapt to their changing environments. (Azmitia 1)

She notes that there is a tension between social and personal identities and she suggests that master narratives "may provide a way for reducing the tension and providing a more contextual, dynamic approach to identity development" (Azmitia 2). Azmitia, however, fails to make a clear distinction between master narratives, social identities, and personal identities, by saying that

> [r]egardless of whether one conceptualizes them as personal identities, social identities, or master narratives … [they all] provide a starting point for learning values, roles,

> symbols, discourse, and more generally, the behaviours that cultural communities expect of their members. (4)

I, however, argue that there is a difference. Social identities and master narratives can be seen as one, in that they "are inherently political and inform their members about their status in their cultural communities" (Azmitia 4). Personal identities differ from social identities and master narratives in that they are open to reinterpretation, whereas the former two "are fairly resistant to change" (Azmitia 4). This distinction is of importance, because the personal identity's ability to alter itself "is essential to reducing intergroup conflicts" (Azmitia 4). In other words, a social identity is an individual's "coordination of their group membership" (Azmitia 3) and focuses on a community's shared narratives and whether they see themselves as a prototypical example of their social background. A personal identity is an individual's narrative explaining the personal situation and environment and how their surroundings influence their cultural sense of self. In addition, a social identity only exists when people find themselves in a situation where there are multiple groups that differ in terms of "characteristics, power and status" (Azmitia 3).

The theory discussed above applies to Jhumpa Lahiri's short story collection, *Interpreter of Maladies*. Lahiri's short stories make a case for the fact that, despite the characters' common heritage, a community's social identity is different from their personal identity. Instead, their social and personal identities are interwoven and reflect the complex and multifaceted nature of cultural identity. In dealing with diasporic experiences, race, gender, and ethnicity cannot be left out of the discussion. Race and ethnicity "provide an attitudinal and motivational lens through which minorities interpret their experiences" (Worrell qtd. in Azmitia 7). Since many of the characters in Lahiri's work share a cultural background, it is more compelling to look at gender and how social constructs of gender are reinterpreted and negotiated through personal identities, as a result of immigration and diasporic experiences. Gender differences are more noticeable, as the characters' social construct of gender is

comparable, whereas racial or ethnic differences are harder to pinpoint, because of the possibility of regional differences. According to Subhadra Mitra Channa, a look at the matrimonial advertisements in one of the largest newspapers in India indicates that "the common thread that runs through is that most advertisements require a girl with good education but traditional home-based values (designated as homely)" (179). He does note that globalisation has led to some difficult situations, as the imagined ideals of what constitutes masculinity and femininity are hard to realise, since they are a combination of traditional and progressive constructions of gender (Mitra Channa 179). In Lahiri's short stories, this also comes to the fore in stories such as Bibi Haldar's and Mr. Kapasi's. Yet, even characters who move to the US struggle with the often seemingly opposite gender ideals. Women, especially, are torn between adhering to the mother ideal or to the more modern female ideal in which a woman is someone "who works outside the home, who is able to argue with her husband and who sometimes may earn more and hold higher status" (Mitra Channa 178).

1.2 Cultural Identity and Diaspora

The following theory will be discussed in relation to Jhumpa Lahiri's novel, *The Namesake*. Firstly, it is important to note that Stuart Hall's theory focuses on Caribbean and black diaspora, a diaspora that was highly involuntary and, as such, differs from the diaspora of the Indian-American characters in Lahiri's novel. There are, however, numerous similarities when one takes into account the effects of diaspora on one's cultural identity. Hall poses that there are two ways of thinking about cultural identity. The first argues that cultural identity reflects "the common historical experiences and shared cultural codes which provide us, as 'one people', with stable, unchanging and continuous frames of reference and meaning, beneath the shifting divisions and vicissitudes of our actual history" (Hall 223). Hall views this definition of cultural identity as "a way of imposing an imaginary coherence on the experience of dispersal and fragmentation, which is the history of all enforced diasporas" (224).

In Lahiri's novel, the diaspora is not necessarily enforced, which explains why certain statements made by Hall do not directly apply to her characters. It is here that a distinction can be made between the complexity of the first-generation's cultural identity and the second-generation's. This imaginary coherence and the idea of shared cultural codes that provide an unchanging frame of reference is applicable to Lahiri's first-generation migrants. Hall notes that he "never once heard a single person refer to themselves or to others as, in some way, or as having been at some time in the past, 'African'" (231). Lahiri's characters, Ashima and Ashoke, do still consider themselves as Indians. The original 'India' is still there. Yet, what makes their narrative a narrative of diaspora experience, is that they recognise that their migration to the US begs for a conception of identity that takes into account heterogeneity, diversity, and hybridity (Hall 235). By doing so, they become Indian Americans who understand that their history in India and their reconstructed identity in the US constitute their cultural identity.

To return to the conceptualisation of cultural identity, Hall argues that there is also a second definition. I argue that this definition is more suitable in describing the experiences of second-generation migrants and the difficulties they face in establishing their own cultural identity. Hall writes that the second stance on cultural identity "recognises that, as well as the many points of similarity, there are also critical points of deep and significant *difference* which constitute 'what we really are'; or rather – since history has intervened – 'what we have become'" (225). This definition argues that there is no such thing as a fixed cultural identity: "Far from being eternally fixed in some essentialised past, they are subject to the continuous 'play' of history, culture and power" (225). Instead, "identities are the names we give to the different ways we are positioned by, and position ourselves within, the narratives of the past" (225).

The concept of difference and its effect on cultural identity by means of positionings and repositionings can be explained with the help of three presences with which the second-generation migrants are confronted: the Indian, the European and the American (Hall 230). Although Hall writes about the *Presence Africaine*, the same ideas apply to the Indian presence. Hall writes that this presence "is the site of the repressed" (230). Additionally, the original India is no longer there, but the second-generation migrant cannot elude its presence and must, therefore, at some point, face it. This is why Hall writes that the diaspora experience requires "symbolic journeys" (232). One must return to India, "but 'by another route': what [India] has *become* in the New World, what we have made of [India]: India – as we re-tell it through politics, memory and desire" (232). Secondly, there is the European presence. This presence, due to India's colonial past, talks about "exclusion, imposition and expropriation" (Hall 233). What this presence essentially does, is othering. Bhabha describes it as "the ambivalent identifications of the racist world … the 'otherness' of the self inscribed in the perverse palimpsest of colonial identity" (qtd. in Hall 233). Lastly, there is the American presence; the place where everything meets. This 'New World' is itself "the beginning of diaspora, of diversity, of hybridity and difference" (Hall 235). Second-generation migrants, like Gogol and Moushumi, have to "constantly produc[e] and reproduc[e] themselves anew, through transformation and difference" (Hall 235). As such, their identity development is much more complex than their first-generation parents', because they constantly have to negotiate their sense of self. While their parents are able to cling to their Indian origins, they cannot, "hence the beginning of the symbolic, of representation, the infinitely renewable source of desire, memory, myth, search, discovery" (Hall 236) that takes place in the 'New World'. When one is finally able to "see and recognise the different parts and histories of ourselves" (Hall 237), it becomes possible to establish a cultural identity. This, however, proves to be more difficult for

second-generation migrants, due to the interplay of the multiple presences and their respective positionings that require more careful reworking.

1.3 The Effects of (Post-)Colonialism on Cultural Identity

This section of the chapter focuses on the disruptive nature of (post-)colonialism as portrayed in Kiran Desai's novel, *The Inheritance of Loss*. According to Elizabeth Jackson, "cultural identity is too fluid to be divided into neat national or even diasporic categories" (26), because "many people's geographical placement is in flux and their identities are too hybrid and complex to be denoted by particular diasporic labels" (26). Desai's novel exemplifies this as it centres around the idea that even when one largely remains in one's own homeland, one's cultural identity is still subjected to change due to the passing of time and the historical events that ensue. Social classes are affected by these changes and either try to break free from their oppressed positions in society or to maintain the position that they have. What follows is an unstable sense of self and a need to redefine one's own cultural identity, as identities are constantly called into question due to historical changes, social hierarchy, and, what Bhabha calls, 'otherness'.

Therefore, Homi Bhabha writes: "The postcolonial perspective resists the attempt at holistic forms of social explanation. It forces a recognition of the more complex cultural and political boundaries that exist on the cusp of these often opposed political spheres" (248). With these opposed political spheres, Bhabha draws attention to the relation between the Third World and the First World (248). Yet, Bhabha also highlights that it is not merely this relationship that is of importance but also the underlying cultural and political implications. The country "had always [had] a messy map" (Desai 9) and systems like the caste system have been around for a long time and are, therefore, still deeply imbedded in the country's culture. It would, thus, be too simple to argue that there is one all-encompassing explanation for the events that take place and the impact they have on cultural identity.

According to Stefan Helgesson, postcolonial literature "cannot be understood exclusively in terms of political power and domination, but also as a world of its own and an enabling alternative to other domains of power" (484). Therefore, writers of postcolonial literature would be mistaken to "block either the local/personal or transnational pole from view, not to keep both in play" (Helgesson 488). Desai does not make this mistake, as the novel's title suggests, because, although inheritance can be understood as simply the colonial past, it could also stand for the already existing social stratification that was established long before the colonists arrived. Her postcolonial novel "challenges the manifold legacies of Eurocentrism" (Helgesson 484), but it does not do so exclusively.

Bhabha's theory of mimicry is an example of colonial power. One could argue that the judge's mimicry was his own choice and that he alone is to blame for the effects of it, but Bhabha, instead, argues that "mimicry emerges as one of the most elusive and effective strategies of colonial power and knowledge" (122). The effect of mimicry "is camouflage" and not "a question of harmonizing with the background, but against a mottled background" (Lacan 99). This spotted and dappled background explains the tragedy that is mimicry. It is a "representation of a difference that is itself a process of disavowal" (Bhabha 122). It has a highly ambivalent nature and is "the sign of a double articulation; a complex strategy of reform, regulation and discipline, which 'appropriates' the Other as it visualizes power" (Bhabha 123). According to Bhabha, a mimic man "alienates his own language of liberty and produces another knowledge of its norms" (123). In doing so, the colonial subject, in this case the judge, becomes a "'partial' presence" (123). This partiality becomes visible in the character's identity in that he becomes dependent on a representation of himself that is based upon a "strategic limitation or prohibition *within* the authoritative discourse itself" (123). This dependency is, however, not necessarily negatively experienced by the colonial subject, because, as long as the colonial power is the highest authority, they are able to enjoy numerous privileges due to their mimicry.

Yet, in a postcolonial and independent setting, the privileges are drastically diminished as in the judge's case in which "to be Anglicized is *emphatically* not to be English" (Bhabha 125). It is here that the dependency becomes problematic.

However, to argue that everything is caused by the colonial power, even in its absence, would be too simple. Desai's character Biju can testify to this. His position exemplifies the interplay between the transnational and the local power. Having been born in a lower caste, Biju tries to pursue the American Dream. Yet, his social status in India follows him all the way to the US. It shows that those within power in India, have an advantage when they decide to migrate and that those who do not have this power, tend to get stuck in a loop of poverty, whether they migrate of not. Although one could argue that the colonial powers are still present in Westernised countries and that "profit could only be harvested in the gap between nations, working one against the other" (Desai 205), the more affluent migrants are able to lead an independent life. The benefits of postcolonial globalisation, thus, "accrue to those who are privileged not by nationality or ethnicity or even gender, but by social class" (Jackson 32). Social classes have been reinforced by the colonists, but have also always been present in Indian society and can, thus, hardly be solely put on colonialism. As a result of this unfairness, nationalistic movements tend to arise. The postcolonial setting allows these new nationalistic narratives to develop, but, due to the continuous interplay of colonial and local powers, the effectivity of these movements is debatable.

Chapter 2

The Interplay between Social and Personal Identity: Gender Roles in *Interpreter of Maladies*

In this chapter, I argue that Lahiri's choice of writing a collection of short stories highlights the interplay of social and personal identity as put forward by Azmitia. Although there is the possibility of writing a short story collection that includes numerous independent stories, Lahiri's collection presents a kind of unity that may not be clear from the start. Lahiri's collection does not make use of a common geographical location, does not relate the story of a set of recurring characters, and does not use one unifying narrative style (Brada-Williams 451).

Instead, Lahiri's short stories are unified by the characters' shared cultural background. In presenting the reader with a variety of characters with unrelated stories, yet a common cultural background, Lahiri manages to represent the Indian community as a whole, without overshadowing its diversity. Her work, in doing so, tries to "solve the problem of representing an entire community within the necessarily limited confines of a single work by balancing the representations" (Brada-Williams 453). Instead of providing the reader with a homogenous group of people going through similar migrant experiences, Lahiri highlights that each of her characters has their own personal experiences and, as such, tries to avoid a biased and stereotypical representations of the Indian community. This approach to writing narratives is not uncommon for short stories written by female authors of the South Asian Diaspora, as their collections centre around social realities and often include personal memories which "traverse the space between the homeland and the diasporic location" (Karthikadevi).

Because of the personal nature of Lahiri's stories, the notion of social and personal identity can be applied to her writing. This chapter sheds light on the cultural side of identity formation and how the idea of a social and a personal identity play a role in this. To do so, this

chapter looks at Lahiri's representation of gender roles. Gender roles are picked up by children at an early age and are intimately connected with ethnicity and race (Azmitia 6). In addition,

> Lahiri's interrogation of Anglo-American feminist paradigms of agency allows us to witness a new reconfigured mode of feminist engagement. She influences conceptions of immigration and feminism in her stories that transcend the confined borders of immigrant experience. (Ranasinha 175)

Therefore, it is compelling to look at gender roles as portrayed by Lahiri in her short stories collection, *Interpreter of Maladies*, as it can provide crucial insights into the cultural identity of her characters, as well as how migration influences their identity by causing shifts in gender roles.

2.1 Representations of Cultural Experiences of Indian(-American) Women

Firstly, there is the story of Shoba and Shukumar, an American-Indian couple on the brink of divorce after the birth of their still-born baby. Before the birth of their son, one could argue that Shoba, in many ways, adheres to the female domestic ideal of the Indian societal ideology. In traditional Indian society, the deep-rooted gender norms "prescribe that every woman should follow—without resistance—the same path, namely, become a housewife" (Kõu and Bailey 185). Shoba seems to follow these gender norms, as she takes good care of the house: "she used to put her coat on a hanger, her sneakers in the closet, and she paid bills as soon as they came" (5), and "the pantry was always stocked" (6). Shoba enjoys buying food and makes sure that she always has enough food in case any guests come over. Shoba and Shukumar even joke that their pantry would last "for their grandchildren to taste" (7).

Shoba's behaviour, however, changes drastically after the death of their son. She starts treating the house "as if it were a hotel" (5), spends most of her day at work, and does not bother to cook anymore. Arguably, the roles have changed and Shoba starts to take on the role of the husband. Men are expected to fulfil the provider role and financially provide for the family

(Chowdhury 198). Shukumar, however, is "still a student at thirty-five" (3) and struggles with self-neglect after the loss of his son. He does enjoy cooking now, because it is the only thing that makes "him feel productive" (7). Although, from a Western point of view, this role-changing is not unheard of, it is rather uncommon in Indian society.

The possibility of Shoba and Shukumar's role switching, however, lies in the fact that they have migrated. Migration can allow women to focus on professional development, as well as enable gender norms to be relaxed (Kõu and Bailey 184-185). Sevilla writes that, due to their hyphenated identity, Shoba and Shukumar are able to "act different to their Indian values" (112). Shoba exemplifies this by showing a certain financial independence and a capability to "think ahead" (6), which Shukumar contrasts with his own mother who fell "to pieces when his father died" (6). Additionally, it is Shoba who starts preparing for a life without Shukumar and who suggests getting a divorce. Something that is unheard of, as "[d]ivorce is still stigmatised in Indian society, and a divorced woman has a lower status in the social hierarchy" (Kõu and Bailey 181). While it is possible to read this story as one showing the effect losing a child has on a relationship, in presenting the reader with a character that is both traditional and progressive, Lahiri also plays with the social identity and the personal identity of Shoba to show that a sense of belonging can change and that migration influences and broadens the options for women.

Lahiri's character Bibi Haldar is another example of a woman who defies traditional views and whose story presents the Indian community as conflicted in that they are, on the one hand, open to new and modern female ideals, while at the same time, there are those who are reluctant to that kind of change. Bibi Haldar is a 29-year-old woman suffering from "an ailment that baffled family, priests, palmists, spinsters, gem therapists, prophets, and fools" (154). This one line already indicates that "[s]ocial relationships and social groups, not individuals, are the fundamental building blocks of society" (Bacon 19). The whole community gets involved in

Bibi's personal matters and her individuality becomes inferior to the social group's needs. In addition to the involvement of the community in finding a cure for Bibi, her illness also "confined her world to the unpainted four-story building in which her only local family, an elder cousin and his wife, rented an apartment on the second floor" (155). Her illness does not only affect her, but also the people around her.

One of the biggest issues, however, is the fact that Bibi's illness keeps her from getting married, which is exemplified when she says: "I will never be cured, never married" (157). In Indian society, a woman above thirty is often considered too old to marry, hence Bibi's worries (Kõu and Bailey 181). After a doctor suggests that marriage might cure her disease, it becomes apparent how traditional Bibi's environment is. Her cousin and his wife are rather taken aback by the doctor's prognosis and blame Bibi (Ranasinha 188). Cousin Haldar and his wife think Bibi has caused enough problems as it is: "Bibi has caused enough worry, added enough to expenses, sullied enough the family name" (159). Their traditional views of gender roles are highlighted when they say: "The girl knows nothing about anything, speaks backward, is practically thirty, can't light a stove, can't boil rice, can't tell the difference between fennel and a cumin seed. Imagine her attempting to feed a man" (159). This statement is then confirmed when the narrator affirms that "they had a point. Bibi had never been taught to be a woman" (159).

Although the narrator confirms this statement about Bibi, the rest of the story suggests that she does not actually need these qualities to get on in life, as she does, eventually, find a place of her own, after she is expelled by Haldar and his wife and, thus, freed from their traditional convictions. The people around Bibi, at first, seem to only be able to think in circles: Bibi is sick, because she is not married, but she is unmarried, because she is sick. To them, Bibi is basically doomed. Yet, the community is taken aback by the Haldars' treatment of Bibi and run them out of business. Taking care of each other is, thus, seen as more important than

thinking about yourself. Bibi claims that she is now “free to discover life as [she] please[d]” (166). After she gives birth to a son, the community is there to help her and it is said that “she was, to the best of our knowledge, cured” (168). Bibi is able to run a little business and take care of her son and, in doing so, shows that marriage is not always the solution. Thus, again, Lahiri plays with the traditional views of society by having Bibi be cured by having a baby without a marriage, which is usually considered a disgrace in Indian society (Ranasinha 189). Moreover, she shows that, despite the disgrace, the community supports Bibi and takes care of her. Lahiri’s story, therefore, exemplifies that Indian social identity has many facets (e.g., community over the individual and gender roles) and that one’s personal identity might go against some of these values, but can still lead to a sense of belonging.

Although the stories of Shoba and Bibi highlight that women have agency, despite the often traditional values of their cultural heritage, there are also women who struggle to find their sense of belonging in a society, such as Mrs. Sen. She is a first-generation migrant who moved to the US with her husband, but has to deal with severe homesickness. Mrs. Sen’s social identity heavily relies on her Indian roots and she is unable to form a personal identity that allows her to weave Western views with her own traditional ways of life. Mrs. Sen, like Shoba before the death of her son, keeps the house tidy and even wears traditional clothing. Moreover, Mrs. Sen spends a great deal of time preparing the ingredients for her meals and takes care of Eliot as a babysitter. Her babysitting advertisement in the supermarket mentions her as: “Professor’s wife, responsible and kind, I will take care of your child in my home” (109). In many ways, Mrs. Sen is the epitome of a traditional housewife and her advertisement and her introduction to Eliot’s mother reflect the tendency of Indian society “to see women not as independent agents, but as intrinsically linked to the identities of their husbands” (Kõu and Bailey 184).

Furthermore, Mrs. Sen is dependant on her husband, as she herself cannot drive yet and used to have a driver in India. Besides missing a driver, Mrs. Sen also misses her family terribly and she says that she cannot sleep in the silence that she finds here "in this place" (113). In calling her house 'a place', it becomes clear that she does not see America as her home and, therefore, she only refers to home when she is talking about India. Additionally, her obsession with food and getting the right ingredients highlights what Sau-ling Cynthia Wong describes as a necessity that first generation migrants have and that is associated with the idea of "nourishment, staples and survival" (qtd. in Williams 70). The missing ingredients reflect her emotional state and exemplify that, for Mrs. Sen, something will always be lacking in America. Food becomes a way for Mrs. Sen to construct her own identity, yet she cannot fully be herself here in the United States (Williams 73). Everything she uses to prepare the meals is connected to her roots. The only things that make her happy are the letters she receives from family, which leads to the apartment being "suddenly to small to contain her" (119), and the news that there is "fish from the seaside" (120). Mr. Sen's insistence on her getting a driving licence is, however, not something that she is interested in, as she says: "Could I drive all the way to Calcutta?" (117). It is mostly for his own convenience that he would like her to gain a certain amount of independence (Williams 74). The joy Mrs. Sen finds in preparing the meals and gathering the ingredients are a way for her to cope with her new environment.

After her car accident, Mr. Sen's insistence on independence ends up leaving Mrs. Sen in a distressed state. She returns to being but the wife of a professor in mathematics and she no longer takes up the special blade from the cupboard or calls "the fish store" (125). With this story, Lahiri shows that, although some women like Shoba and Bibi gain independence and can find a sense of belonging through their independence, there are also women like Mrs. Sen who "were basically living in the United States because of their husbands and didn't have an identity or purpose of their own here" (Frankfort and Ciuraru 132). It also highlights that some

characters do not manage to form a narrative that integrates both Western and Indian values and that some women prefer to stick to their traditional identity and not assimilate as much as others because their traditional identity feels more natural and grounded.

2.2 Representations of Cultural Experiences of Indian(-American) Men

Besides Lahiri's diverse representation of the cultural experiences of the women discussed above, she also gives a broad depiction of the experiences from a male perspective. Again, she considers the effect that their social identities have on the personal narratives that they create for themselves. Like in the stories she created for the women, she highlights that, despite a similar cultural heritage, each of the men have to come to terms with their identity in their own way and that their problems shed light on the complex nature of cultural identity formation.

Firstly, there is the narrative of Shukumar's personal identity. Shukumar, unlike his wife Shoba, does not show many signs of being a very traditional Indian family man. He has little connection with his cultural heritage, although he does seem to regret this. He says that he "hadn't spent as much time in India as Shoba" (12), as he often stayed with his aunt and uncle while his parents went to visit their home country alone, because he nearly died of "amoebic dysentery" (12) as an infant. To a certain extent, this can be seen as a hint at Shukumar's inability to live within the Indian society. He does become interested in his roots, but only after his father's passing and he wishes now "that he had had his own childhood story of India" (12).

Yet, besides his dissertation on "agrarian revolts in India" (2), Shukumar does not show much interest in any other cultural aspect of Indian society. He is "unable to decipher the literary diction" (13) of the Bengali poets, he does not take on the role of the provider and he shows little to no interest in having children both before and after their son is still-born. He does show a certain amount of diligence in his work ethic, but, in doing so, completely disregards his wife's feelings as he turns the nursery into his office before going to the hospital to see his wife. Despite the couples' common heritage, their different views and personal identities result in a

feeling of isolation. Their traditional roles are turned around and, eventually, Shoba is the one who decides to leave. Although it is not made explicit, it seems that their decision to go on and live their lives separately is for the best, as both of them are only able to communicate with each other and show emotions in the dark. Yet, in traditional India, this decision would be frowned upon.

The story of Mr. and Mrs. Sen portrays a similar situation in that the couple also experience a feeling of isolation and show an inability to communicate effectively. Mr. Sen is able to provide for his wife, but they do not have any children. He shows no interest in her need for obtaining the right ingredients and is much more concerned about getting his wife to be independent. Additionally, he has little regard for his wife's difficulties in assimilating to a new environment. Like Shukumar, Mr. Sen proves that he can live in a new country and that he does not struggle with homesickness. Mr. Sen is, however, not as in touch with his Indian roots as his wife is and, thus, he fails to have a happy marriage. He cannot relate to his wife's situation and does not have the same kind of attachment to his cultural heritage as she does. Mr. Sen is unwilling to give his wife the kind of support she needs in order to feel more at home in the US, as he tells her to just get the fish she needs and to not "waste time" (124), disregarding the meaning it has for his wife. In pushing her to become independent, they only become more estranged and alienated. Thus, because of their imbalance and Mr. Sen's inability to understand his wife's needs, their marriage does not work. However, in contrast to Shoba and Shukumar's story, from Mrs. Sen's traditional perspective, divorce is not an option.

Unlike Shukumar and Mr. Sen, Sanjeev, in the story "This Blessed House", is the one who has trouble disowning Indian cultural norms and traditions. Sanjeev and his wife Twinkle are newly-weds and share an American-Indian background. Their level of embeddedness within the Indian culture, however, differs greatly. Sanjeev is rather conservative and traditional, whereas his wife is more non-conformist and non-traditional. This difference is made clear at

the beginning of the story when Twinkle finds both “a white effigy of Christ” (133) and an unopened vinegar bottle. Sanjeev’s first reaction is that Twinkle should “[t]hrow it away” (133). Twinkle, however, says she could try cooking something with the vinegar and thinks that the statue might be “worth something” (133). Sanjeev dismisses this idea by saying that “we’re not Christian” (134), to which Twinkle replies: “No, we’re not Christians. We’re good little Hindus” (134). Besides Sanjeev’s insistence on not being Christian, he also holds onto memories that remind him of home, such as the “Mughlai chicken with spinach from his favorite Indian restaurant” (135).

In addition, Sanjeev expects his wife to behave in a more traditional way by adhering to the earlier-mentioned gender roles. When he finds Twinkle laying in bed one day, as she says she is bored, he expects her to take care of the house and to make sure everything is ready. Yet, this is something that “didn’t bother her, these scattered, unsettled matters” (138). Furthermore, Twinkle is not interested in the traditional ways of cooking: “Indian food, she complained, was a bother” (140). Thus, Sanjeev, like Shukumar, ends up taking over the role of preparing dinner. Sanjeev’s hopes of a traditional wife are strengthened later on in the story when he “thought with a flicker of regret of the snapshots his mother used to send him from Calcutta, of prospective brides who could sing and sew and season lentils without consulting a cookbook” (143).

Sanjeev’s conservative views can be related to his background, as his parents still live in Calcutta, whereas Twinkle’s parents moved to California. Therefore, it seems that Twinkle easily adapts to new situations, as the guests “laughed at her anecdotes and observations, forming a widening circle around her” (149), while Sanjeev struggles with his sense of belonging and finds himself alone replenishing “samosas that he kept warming evenly in the oven, and getting ice for people’s drinks, and opening more bottles of champagne with some difficulty, and explaining for the fortieth time that he wasn’t Christian” (149). Sanjeev’s

reluctance towards trying new things and adjusting to new situations is further highlighted by the way in which Twinkle's vinegar dish surprises and unsettles him at the same time (Williams 76). It shows that perhaps some part of Sanjeev is interested in this new country and the adventures it brings, yet he is too scared to let go of his traditional views and would rather stick to the things he knows. The story of "This Blessed House", thus, exemplifies the different experiences migrants have in a new environment and how they have to negotiate between their social and personal identity. Additionally, it also shows that women are not always the ones who experience difficulties in adapting to a new culture.

In the short story "Interpreter of Maladies", the reader is presented with the Indian taxi-driver Mr. Kapasi who, like Sanjeev, has a certain worldview that becomes problematic. During his trip with the Das family, Mr. Kapasi says that his greatest wish is to "[serve] as an interpreter between nations" (58-59). Mrs. Das becomes the central point of this desire. Ranasinha writes that Mrs. Das takes the centre stage in Mr. Kapasi's desire for correspondence because she embodies "transnational mobility and capital" (185), something that Mr. Kapasi longs for. As such, he wishes to correspond with Mrs. Das, but, as a result, fails to see that Mrs. Das shows little to no interest in this, which is symbolised by the fluttering away of the slip of paper that had his address written on it.

Because Mr. Kapasi views Mrs. Das and her family through a postcolonial Indian lens, he sets unrealistic expectations and anchors meaning on deceptive signs (Sevilla 108). The first thing that he notices is that "[t]he family looked Indian but dressed as foreigners did" (43) and he asks Mrs. Das whether they were born in India, to which Mr. Das replies: "Oh, Mina and I were both born in America" (45). Mr. and Mrs. Das are in many ways a westernized couple and Mr. Kapasi has taken note of this. Mr. Das refers to his wife as Mina in front of the children, Mrs. Das wears her hair almost as short as her husband, the children say monkeys instead of "Hanuman" (47), and Mrs. Das is not keen on helping her children when they need it. When

Mrs. Das is impressed by the interpreting job that Mr. Kapasi has, he mistakes her interest in interpreting maladies for a genuine interest in his work.

Yet, when Mr. Kapasi finds out the real reason for her interest, namely that she cheated on her husband and that one of her children is not his, he feels insulted and he no longer regards Mrs. Das as desirable. The way in which Mr. Kapasi's interpreting has failed shows "how constructions of gender and 'national' identity are being refigured within contemporary transnational contexts of immigration and globalisation" (Ranasinha 184). Additionally, due to Mr. Kapasi's social identity, he morally critiques Mrs. Das' behaviour based on a "conventional, traditional, patriarchal sense of honour" (Ranasinha 185). Although Mr. Kapasi tries to transcend the existing boundaries between him and the Das family by reinterpreting their identity and conduct from a postcolonial point of view, Mrs. Das's secret eventually causes him to fall back into a social construct of identity in which he has to criticise her behaviour.

Lastly, there is the story of an unnamed narrator in "The Third and Final Continent". As the last story in Lahiri's collection, it also plays a crucial role in bringing the cycle of stories to a meaningful end. In many ways, this story helps answer and understand the questions raised in the other stories. The unnamed narrator starts out his story saying that he had only "ten dollars to his name" (169) and that, after arriving in London, he lived in a house with several "penniless Bengali bachelors", all of whom were "struggling to educate and establish themselves abroad" (169). Like many other bachelors, he eventually gets an arranged marriage in Calcutta and, only a week later, starts his job in Boston. He is determined to assimilate and makes sure he is prepared for his new destination by reading "*The Student Guide to North America*" (170). After a week, he says he had adjusted and that he now ate "cornflakes and milk" (171).

Before the narrator can start living in Boston with his wife, he has to live with the 103-year-old Mrs. Croft, a woman who is fascinated by the moon-landing and who has seen the world around her drastically change. Mrs. Croft is in many ways still a traditional woman who

does not allow any female visitors in the house, despite the fact that the narrator is already married. Additionally, the narrator and Mrs. Croft's sixty-eight-year-old daughter, Helen, cannot have private conversations without a chaperone, and Mrs. Croft says that she would have had any girl wearing a miniskirt arrested. Yet, it is Mrs. Croft's insistence of the narrator being a "gentleman" (180) and his wife, Mala, being "a perfect lady" (191), that helps the narrator understand the difficulties of having to adjust to a completely new environment.

According to Sevilla, "Mrs. Croft's spirit emboldens the narrator's sense of agency, mustering an enduring courage to assimilate into the unfamiliar environment with the aid of a promising relationship with Mala" (117). The narrator's attitude towards Mala and his views about their marriage, at first, resembles that of Mr. Sen and Shukumar, as the narrator sees his marriage "as a duty expected of [him]"(177) and does not bother "to console [Mala]" (177) when she was crying in bed missing her family and her own home. Eventually, the narrator expresses sympathy for Mala's situation as he says: "Like me, Mala had traveled far from home, not knowing where she was going, or what she would find, for no reason other than to be my wife" (190). Mala and the narrator continue living in the US and are able to make it their home, while occasionally visiting their home country.

This story, thus, shows how difficult it can be to create a personal identity in a world where social conventions are radically different. In addition, it also provides an answer to the question whether and how social and personal identities can be reconciled in exemplifying how patience and understanding is necessary in order to gain a sense of belonging. In ending the collection with this short story, Lahiri emphasises that cultural identity formation is not easy and that it takes effort to get to a happy ending. The characters whose personal identity reflects the ability to transform and to marry the two cultures together, often come out the happiest.

Chapter 3

Diasporic Identities and Their Generational Differences in Lahiri's *The Namesake*

In this chapter, I argue that Lahiri's novel highlights the complexity of cultural identity by focussing on the notion of *diaspora identities* as put forward by Stuart Hall. These diaspora identities are identities that "are constantly producing and reproducing themselves anew, through transformation and difference" (Hall 235). I, however, argue that the diaspora identities of second-generation migrants are more complex than those of the first-generation. That is not to say that first generation migrants have a fixed cultural identity and have not faced the difficulties of assimilation. Yet, as argued by Nathalie Friedman, this novel no longer centres around the idea of the 'American Dream', but instead focuses on what comes after. For the immigrant generation, India will always be the place to return to and America will never be fully considered as a "new adopted home" (Friedman 114). However, for second-generation migrants, America is home, as it is here that their two cultures meet (Friedman 115). Unlike their parents, they do not have a direct line or connection with India. Additionally, despite their enrolment in US education and its labour market, they are also not fully considered as Americans. Because of this discrepancy, they are more subjected to "the different ways [they] are positioned by, and position [themselves] within, the narratives of the past" (Hall 225). Second generation migrants are more prominently framed by two axes at the same time; one that represents similarity and continuity, whereas the other represents difference and rupture (Hall 226). According to Heinze, a second-generation's cultural identity "represents the continuously changing subject positions that [they] don, [their] "identity choices" and cultural affiliations made in communicating with [their] surroundings" (197). In short, this chapter exemplifies that *The Namesake* highlights the generational differences of diaspora identities in terms of their own positioning in the past as well as how they are positioned by others.

3.1 The Cultural Identity of First-Generation Migrants in Lahiri's *The Namesake*

As this section argues that first-generation migrants face positioning in a different and less complex manner than their US-born children, it is important to first describe the Indian diasporic experience in general and elucidate why, in terms of positioning and definition of diaspora identity, they do not necessarily fit Stuart Hall's definition completely. It is true that their cultural identity is one that knows both points of similarity and difference, as history also plays a role in their identity formation (Hall 225). Their identity has been shaped and reshaped by their migrant experience and is not "eternally fixed in some essentialised past" (225). However, in the context of Lahiri's novel, one could argue that the original 'India' is still there, as Ashima and Ashoke regularly return to their native country and have, for this reason, still a direct link with their past. Yet, Ashima and Ashoke's cultural identity has changed in America, as it is here that they "re-tell [the stories of India] through politics, memory and desire" (Hall 232). Therefore, they are still subject to positioning, but, as will be explained later on, not as prominently as their second-generation children.

To exemplify why this is the case, I provide an analysis of Ashima and Ashoke's identity formation. Firstly, it is important to note that Lahiri's novel starts in the year 1968, right after the implementation of the 1965 Immigration Act (Heinze 193). This act was "aimed at recruiting professionals from overseas" (193). Therefore, Ashima and Ashoke's story no longer centres around the idea of the American Dream, as the act focused on recruiting professionals. Ashima and Ashoke both come from families that are not in a position that would require their children to leave the country in pursuit of a better life. Ashima was "working towards a college degree" (7) in Calcutta before she got married, while Ashoke "had gone to St. Xavier's, and then B.E. College, graduating first-class-first from both institutions" (9), which enabled him to get a "Ph.D. in Boston" (9). In addition, Ashoke's family was able to enjoy "a long-standing position of privilege in India, one that allows them the pleasures of reading foreign literatures,

travel across India and to points abroad, and foreign study" (Friedman 119). As such, India's colonial past is more positively framed in Lahiri's novel in comparison to Hall's description of the diasporic experience and the European colonial presence. Although Ashima and Ashoke do not leave their native country in pursuit of the American Dream, their diasporic experience is still shaped by many instances of difference and positioning.

Like many of the women in Lahiri's *Interpreter of Maladies*, Ashima has the most difficulties with adjusting to life in America. Ranasinha writes that these contrasting gendered responses to migration are common when it comes to first-generation migrants in Lahiri's work (197). Ashoke's reason for wanting to go to the US is fuelled by his trainwreck trauma and by the words the late Ghosh spoke to him before the accident: "He imagined not only walking, but walking away as far as he could from the place in which he was born and in which he had nearly died" (20). In addition, Ashoke claims that "[i]n America anything is possible" (100). Both in the Indian context and in the American context, men enjoy a "privileged status" (Ranasinha 197), as their professional lives enable them to do so, while women like Ashima are "homesick and bewildered" (38). Ashima's first glimpse of America, instead, hints at her feelings and struggles: "Leafless trees with ice-covered branches. Dog urine and excrement embedded in the snowbanks. Not a soul on the street" (30). Everything feels unfamiliar and lonely to Ashima. These feelings return when Gogol arrives into the world: "She has never known of a person entering the world so alone, so deprived" (25). Moreover, her pregnancy intensifies those feelings of deprivation, as she longs for a certain Indian street food snack that she is unable to replicate in the US: "Tasting from a cupped palm, she frowns; as usual, there's something missing" (1). Ashima is terrified of the thought of having to raise a child in a foreign country "where she is related to no one, where she knows so little, where life seems so tentative and spare" (6). She is still unaccustomed to life in the US and compares everything to India. Although Ashoke more easily adapts to this new life, he, too, makes his own comparisons. As

such, the novel "articulates different expectations and familial responsibilities from normative Anglo-American ones" (Ranasinha 197-198). The way in which they communicate is, therefore, always positioned both by their own relation to the past, as well as by the assumptions made by others about Indians and the way they supposedly live.

With regard to their own positioning, Ashoke and, especially, Ashima think of themselves as foreigners, at least at the beginning of the story. She says that being a foreigner is

> a sort of lifelong pregnancy – a perpetual wait, a constant burden, a continuous feeling out of sorts. It is an ongoing responsibility, a parenthesis in what had once been ordinary life, only to discover that that previous life has vanished, replaced by something more complicated and demanding. Like pregnancy, being a foreigner is something that elicits the same curiosity from strangers, the same combination of pity and respect. (50)

On the other hand, they look at the Americans with that same kind of curiosity, as they are constantly aware of the many differences between their own way of life and the American one. Ashima has, for example, "gathered that Americans, in spite of their public declarations of affection … prefer their privacy" (3). Additionally, both of them note that "[r]icksaw drivers dress better than professors here" (31) and Ashima remembers how dirty the Montgomery's apartment is. In spite of these negative observations, certain moments positively surprise the Gangulis, such as when someone reminds Ashima of her forgotten belongings and how they manage to get everything back: "Somehow, this small miracle causes Ashima to feel connected to Cambridge in a way she has not previously thought possible, affiliated with its exceptions as well as its rules" (43). While she tells her friends about his event, a friend says: "Only in this country" (43). While the Gangulis have their opinions about the Americans, the Americans also make assumptions about them; be it out of pity, curiosity, or respect. An example of this, is the assumption made by Judy Montgomery when she says she "thought that Indians were supposed

to be vegetarian" (39). Likewise, Mr. Wilcox, the hospital's birth certificate compiler, does not understand the Bengali naming tradition and suggests that they name Gogol after one of his ancestors, something Mr. Wilcox regards as a "fine tradition" (28). This is, however, something that would be ridiculed in India, as, "[w]ithin Bengali families, individual names are sacred, inviolable" (28). Furthermore, Gogol is aware of "cashiers smirking at his parent's accents" (67) and he is taken aback by the fact that their mailbox now says 'green gang', knowing it is targeted at his parents. From these examples, it becomes clear that Ashima and Ashoke are subjected to positioning, both because of their own relation to the past and their status as migrants, which results in racialisation and, in some cases, in becoming a victim of racism.

Despite the prejudices they face as foreigners, they do assimilate in a hybridised form. According to Hall, the diaspora experience is defined by the "recognition of a necessary heterogeneity and diversity" (235). The Gangulis are aware of this, as they open themselves up to certain American traditions. Ashoke tells Ashima that it is not shameful to buy furniture at a yard sale, as he points out that "even his chairman shops [there], that in spite of living in a mansion an American is not above wearing a pair of secondhand pants, bought for fifty cents" (52). Moreover, Ashima prepares Gogol a "peanut butter and jelly sandwich" (54) and "to a casual observer, the Gangulis, apart from their name on their mailbox, apart from their issues of *India Abroad* and *Sangbad Bichitra* that are delivered there, appear no different from their neighbours" (64). It, however, does unsettle Ashima and Ashoke "that their children sound just like Americans, expertly conversing in a language that still at times confounds them, in accents they are accustomed not to trust" (65). Therefore, the Gangulis do try to make sure that their children do not forget about their roots and send them to Bengali class. Ashima and Ashoke's friends are also mostly Bengali and, unlike their children, they "slip into bolder, less complicated versions of themselves, their voices louder, their smiles wider, revealing a confidence Gogol and Sonia never see on Pemberton Road" (81-82), when they are in India.

Ashima and Ashoke's assimilation is, thus, selective and proves that they still feel more connected to their 'Indianness', as they maintain close connections with their cultural heritage through meals, music, the children's upbringing and their friends (Ranasinha 201).

After Ashoke's death, it becomes clear how much Ashima's attitude towards America has changed and how she no longer views her stay in the US as a purely involuntary move in order to be with her husband. Gogol credits his mother for "having moved to a different country and [for having] made a separate life" (233). The focus on the word 'separate' suggests that her life in America is a life of its own and not a mere recreation of everything that was missing from India. In addition, she stays true to her name, as she is now "without borders, without a home of her own, a resident everywhere and nowhere" (276). In dividing her time between India and the US, instead of returning to India completely, she does not belong to the diaspora of people who feel like they have to return, no matter what, to "some sacred homeland" (Hall 235). Instead, she shows the essence of hybridity, or as Friedman puts it, she "becomes part of the shifting ethnoscape of global sojourners: a true cosmopolitan traveler" (123). Not only does her decision to travel back and forth highlight this, but also her attitude towards the American way of life. She accepts Gogol's divorce, while knowing that Benagalis consider it their duty to stay married and "she has learned to do things on her own, and though she still wears saris, still puts her long hair in a bun, she is not the same Ashima who had once lived in Calcutta" (176). This stands in stark contrast with Ashoke's earlier observation that the widowed Mrs. Jones life would be considered "humiliating: eating alone, driving herself to work in snow and sleet, seeing her children and grandchildren, at most, three of four times a year" (48). Ashima, like Mrs. Jones, can take care of herself and, although, "she still does not feel fully at home within [the] walls on Pemberton Road she knows that it is home nevertheless" (280). It is here that she is reminded of her life with Ashoke, "of the unexpected life he in choosing to marry her, had given her here, which she had refused for so many years to accept" (280).

Thus, despite positioning themselves and having been positioned by others, both positively and negatively, Ashima and Ashoke are able to create a life in the US by hybridity. The hybridity and the positioning highlight the complexity of their cultural identity without disregarding the difficulties they have faced. However, the next section sheds light on the idea that Ashima and Ashoke's diaspora experience is far less complicated than their second-generation children's. Second-generation migrants, like Gogol and Moushumi, struggle significantly more with the ways in which they are positioned, which respectively leads to a more complex cultural identity formation.

3.2 The Cultural Identity of Second-Generation Migrants in Lahiri's *The Namesake*

In this section, I argue that second-generation migrants are more conflicted when it comes to determining their cultural identity because of the way they position themselves and are positioned by others within the narratives of the past (Hall 225). The previous section served to elucidate that first-generation migrants position themselves and are positioned by others and that this leads to a complex cultural identity. Yet, this section shows that the second generation faces more problematic positionings, such as mislabelling, which, in turn, leads to a more complex sense of cultural identity. Homi Bhabha argues that "to exist is to be called into being in relation to an otherness, its look, or locus" (63). For this reason, one can argue that the 'otherness' that the Indian-American second-generation is confronted with causes a lot of identity complications, as both first-generation Indian-Americans and other Americans have certain expectations of the second generation and have already formed an idea of who or what they are or are supposed to be (Munos 195). Munos points out that

> [t]he Indian-American second-generation subject might see reflected back to him (or her), by turns, his/her own deformed image as an 'Indian' means of embodying a fiction of unadulterated Indianness across the generations, or a 'US' way of perpetuating the

> model-minority myth and its implied model of whiteness, depending on the identity of the onlooker. (195-196)

Second-generation migrants are, thus, given a mirror that only reflects a cultural identity back at them that represents a reconstructed past (Munos 196). They are either seen through an Indian lens or through a Western/European one. Unlike first-generation migrants, second-generation migrants cannot go back to some essentialised past, as their relationship with India and the US is different from their parents. Therefore, they are faced with the task of recognising "the different parts and histories of [themselves], [and] to connect those points of identification" (Hall 237). This, however, requires a recognition of hybridity and a careful reworking of the narratives of the past which seems to be the crux of most of Lahiri's second-generation migrants in *The Namesake*.

Firstly, I analyse the protagonist's, Gogol's, cultural identity. From the beginning, Gogol's identity is complex. When Gogol is born, there is already a kind of positioning present. Instead of having a name, Gogol is simply "BABY BOY GANGULI" (22). Unless his parents decide on a name, they cannot take Gogol home with them. Eager to stick to the Bengali naming tradition, Ashima and Ashoke have asked Ashima's grandmother to send them a name for their child. The letter containing the name, however, never arrives and, after Ashima's grandmother becomes ill, she is unable to send a new letter or tell them the name. The idea that Gogol's name – or identity – is somewhere out there suggests that he might have had access to his true identity "were it not in fact suspended in midair" (Heinze 192). Yet, it is also possible to see this letter as a sign that Gogol will struggle with his sense of identity in the future, as the message "relating to the notion of origin" is lost (Munos 111). Furthermore, it shows that the diasporic experience of second-generation migrants will always be connected to the idea of having some essentialised past that is not attainable and, therefore, needs to be reworked into the individual's cultural identity.

Eventually, his parents decide on the name Gogol. This name, however, already carries a heavy load, as it is connected to Ashoke's survival and his favourite author Nikolai Gogol. The issues that arise from this positioning are again rooted in his parent's experience and history (Bacon 226). Additionally, both parents have a different view of Gogol's first moments in the world; where Ashoke claims that Gogol is a "[l]ucky boy" (24), Ashima claims "she has never known of a person entering the world so alone, so deprived" (25). Ashoke sees Gogol's birth in the US as a kind of upgrade and an opportunity for a better future, whereas Ashima bewails how Gogol is deprived from his Indian family and cultural heritage. This binary way of seeing things continues to be of importance throughout the story, as Gogol has to find a way to marry both his Indian roots and his US citizenship together. The uncertainty that hangs over Gogol's identity is also highlighted at his annaprasan. Here Gogol is "forced at six months to confront his destiny" (40), which results in him crying and not being able to pick any object that could predict his future. Thus, who Gogol is and who he will become remains unpredictable and complicated.

When Gogol grows up, he feels more comfortable with the American way of life. He prefers having American dinner and his parents even celebrate Christmas because he and Sonia prefer it to the "worship of Durga and Saraswati" (64). Gogol is not much interested in his parents' heritage and notes that "[t]he children all study without interest [in Bengali class], wishing they could be at ballet or softball practice" (66). Additionally, Gogol feels like an American, as he, for example, thinks that the 'green gang' on their mailbox is aimed at his parents, not at him and Sonia, and he notices that the Americans "prefer to direct their conversation to [him]" (68), as he has mastered the language. Moreover, neither Gogol nor Sonia feels at home in India and both get terribly ill there. Their family draws the conclusion that "they were not made to survive in a poor country" (86). As such, they are positioned by their Indian family members as not really belonging to their country. Gogol starts to see the

eight months spent in his parent's native country as something "quickly forgotten, like clothes worn for a special occasion, or for a season that has passed, suddenly cumbersome, irrelevant to their lives" (88). From this passage, it becomes clear that second-generation migrants do not feel the same connection to India as their parents do. It is said that "[Gogol] knows that *deshi*, a generic word for "countrymen", means "Indian," knows that his parents and all their friends always refer to India simply as *desh*. But Gogol never thinks of India as desh. He thinks of it as Americans do, as India" (118). So far, it seems that Gogol is only positioned by his parents' past and that he is not confronted with the same kind of prejudices and positionings his parents got from the Americans.

Gogol's problems lie in the fact that he does not know who he is and his name plays a crucial role in this. When Gogol is in kindergarten, his parents want him to take on the name Nikhil, his good name. Both names would be used and would serve as a reminder that "one is not all things to all people" (26). Gogol, however, refuses to accept the name Nikhil, because Nikhil is "someone he doesn't know" (57). By the time he is fourteen, however, Gogol starts to hate his name and having to explain it. He hates that his name is "both absurd and obscure, that it has nothing to do with who he is, that it is neither Indian nor American but of all things Russian" (76). Similar to his name being suspended in mid-air, his name, Gogol, represents an absence of cultural history (Heinze 194-195). Moreover, Gogol says that "[a]t times his name, an entity shapeless and weightless, manages nevertheless to distress him physically, like the scratchy tag of a shirt he has been forced to permanently wear" (76). This metaphor is similar to a positioning, because Gogol did not choose his own name and is forced by his parents to accept it, although he realises that he has made the decision as a younger child, to stick with Gogol. As a result of the uncomfortable feeling he gets from his name, he contemplates the idea of having a "B-side to the self" (76) like his parents when they are in Calcutta, but this will prove to be fallacious solution to his problem later on.

When Gogol starts dating, he wants to use another name and starts using Nikhil. The moment he starts doing this, he feels "at once guilty and exhilarated, protected as if by an invisible shield" (96). This new name operates as a shield because there is no history to the name and he is able to fill "its emptiness with whatever meaning he chooses" (Heinze 195). Yet, when he is asked by his parents and the judge why he wishes to change his name, he is at a loss. It becomes clear that he is simply embarrassed by his name. Now that his name has been officially changed to Nikhil, things still do not feel exactly right. Everyone who knows him as Gogol, continues to call him so, while everyone who knows him as Nikhil, knows nothing about his past as Gogol. Thus, in asserting this new name, Gogol does not explore or reconstruct his past, but simply does away with it, which will come back to haunt him. All that Gogol is left with, is a "vector of difference and rupture" (Hall 226), which causes him to lose the vector that allows him to be grounded in the past (Hall 227). Whenever his parents address him as Nikhil, it makes him feel as if "in that instance that he is not related to them, not their child" (106). It is said that "the substitution feels wrong to Gogol, correct but off-key, the way it sounds when his parents speak English to him instead of Bengali" (106). Although the name Nikhil appeals to Gogol, he becomes aware of the fact that it also greatly distances him from his own family and his cultural heritage. The idea of self-invention, thus, becomes problematic. According to Heinze, the idea of free choice of identity is an illusion (197). This is because of

> the irreducible immediacy in which human beings are born in society: not as pure unattached individuals free to choose their social affiliations (whether gender, ethnicity, or class) but as already ascribed members of society … The question of choice here is itself fallacious, for human beings cannot exist as "individuals" before they are born [.] (Chatterjee 232)

While Gogol is desperate to make an identity of his own, he only further alienates himself from everything that contributes to his identity.

This alienation reaches its climax during his relationship with Maxine. Right before Gogol meets Maxine, he decides to start living in New York, instead of Massachusetts. His reason for making this decision is that

> [h]e didn't want to attend his father's alma mater, and live in an apartment in Central Square as his parents once had, and revisit the streets about which his parents speak nostalgically. He didn't want to go home on the weekends, to go with them to pujos and Bengali parties, to remain unquestionably in their world. (126)

Especially the emphasis on 'their world' is significant, because it means that he consciously makes the decision to stay away from his Indian heritage. Gogol's relationship with Maxine can then also be seen as the ultimate way to fit into the idea of the "model-minority mandate of maintaining whiteness as utterly desirable" (Munos 191). Maxine's parents' view of Gogol also confirm this idea, as "they are at once satisfied and intrigued by his background, by his years at Yale and Columbia, his career as an architect, his Mediterranean looks" (134). Maxine's mother, Lydia, even remarks that Gogol "could be Italian" (134). Gogol is completely engulfed by Maxine's affluence and greatly enjoys his time with them. It is even said that "[q]uickly, simultaneously, he falls in love with Maxine, the house, Gerald and Lydia's manner of living, for to know her and to love her is to know and love all of these things" (137). However, he is aware of a difference between himself and Maxine. He realises that "she has never wished she were anyone other than herself" (138). By staying with Maxine's family, Gogol tries on an overcoat that simply does not fit him, as he becomes aware of the fact that "his immersion in Maxine's family is a betrayal of his own" (141). According to Brombert, "[b]y implication one is never totally free of an overcoat, there is no such thing as a pristine and authentic identity which might then be covered by a free choice of cultural, personal attire, habits, norms" (qtd. in Heinze 197-198). Gogol is confronted with this fact when "[a]t dinner he is asked by his neighbour, a middle-aged woman named Pamela, at what age he moved to America from India"

(157). Pamela also mislabels him when she assumes that Gogol "must be lucky that way" (157) and that he "must never get sick [visiting India]" (157). Pamela is shocked to hear that he "gets sick all the time" (157) and replies with: "[b]ut you're Indian … I'd think the climate wouldn't affect you, given your heritage" (157). Maxine's mother tries to help Gogol by saying that he is American and was born here. This, however, does not mean that Gogol is fully seen as an American, as he cannot hide his Indian features from Pamela.

Gogol can no longer escape his Indianness and is tragically confronted with it when he gets a phone call saying that his father had passed away. Suddenly, he feels the need to be with his family and is aware that Maxine does not belong there. When he comes back to his parental home, he partakes in the many Bengali funereal traditions. When Maxine finally comes over again, she suggests that he get away from all this and that he simply cannot take care of his mother forever, but Gogol says that he does not "want to get away" (182). Not long after, Maxine and Gogol break up as Maxine can no longer stand Gogol's newfound protectiveness over his mother and sister and even gets jealous of the attention he gives to them. Yet, what comes after, Gogol's attempt at a "perfect ethic retention" (Munos 191), is also not the solution to his identity crisis.

In order to get Gogol back into a relationship, his mother suggests that he call Moushumi, an old acquaintance who knows both his old name and his new name. Like Gogol, Moushumi also struggles with her cultural identity in that she has also tried to distance herself from her Indian roots. She tells Gogol how "he was exactly the sort of person she has sought to avoid" (212) and that she "made a pact, with two other Bengali girls she knew, never to marry a Bengali man" (213). Furthermore, she has also been on numerous trips to Calcutta, "being plucked out of [her] American [life] for months at a time" (212). She has been subjected to her parents' traditional views and Gogol even gathers that "in her case these warnings had been relentless, and had therefore plagued her far more than they had him" (213). Yet, unlike Gogol,

"immersing herself in a third language, a third culture, had been her refuge" (214). She argues that "[i]t was easier to turn her back on the two countries that could claim her in favor of one that had no claim whatsoever" (214). However, when she falls in love with Graham and she eventually hears him talk negatively about her cultural background, she says: "It was one thing for her to reject her background, to be critical of her family's heritage, another to hear it from him" (217).

Thus, both Gogol and Moushumi end up together after a series of failed attempts to turn their backs on their cultural heritage. In marrying each other, their attempt to reconcile with their cultural background fails too, as their marriage means a return to "expected cultural norms" (Friedman 122). It is exactly this that becomes the undoing of their marriage, although Moushumi, at first, says that "doing precisely what had been expected of her for her entire life, had felt forbidden, wildly transgressive, a breach of her own instinctive will" (250). She is, however, not happy with Gogol as it feels to her like she has given up on her will to be self-invented and to not be part of a tradition that her parents swear by. Moushumi ends up getting an affair and eventually Gogol and Moushumi separate. Gogol does not blame Moushumi, as he says that "they had both acted on the same impulse, that was their mistake. They had both sought comfort in each other, and in their shared world, perhaps for the sake of novelty, or out of the fear that that world was slowly dying" (284). It is impossible for Moushumi and Gogol to return to their Indian roots by their marriage, as cultural identity is not "a fixed essence at all, lying unchanged outside history and culture. It is not some universal and transcendental spirit inside us on which history had made no fundamental mark … It is not a fixed origin to which we can make some final and absolute Return" (Hall 226). Instead of turning their backs against their past or trying to fully return to an imagined sense of self, Gogol and Moushumi have to find a way to marry their past with their present and future.

Therefore, I return to the binary opposition discussed above. It is important to see that Gogol and Moushumi have been able to benefit from their US citizenship when it comes to making a living and being able to navigate in this country. However, at the same time, they will never be fully American due to their features and the mislabelling that ensues. Furthermore, they are able to take part in Indian traditions, but can never fully return to this heritage in a way that their parents did, as they are confronted with views and norms on this side of the spectrum as well. What is asked of them is to find a way to combine the two and to recognise "a necessary heterogeneity and diversity" (235). For this reason, Gogol's attempt to take on another name fails to give him the kind of hybridity he needs, as taking on the name Nikhil reveals "inaccessible absences and deferrals in one's concept of self and relationships" (Heinze 197). Gogol, therefore, says that in trying to correct his parents mistake and the fact that he was missing the good name his grandmother had intended him to have, "he had tried to correct that randomness, that error. And yet it had not been possible to reinvent himself fully, to break from that mismatched name. His marriage had been something of a misstep as well" (287). In Moushumi's case, engulfing herself in a third culture, becomes a constant refusal to face her own identity and, similar to Gogol's case, a fallacious idea that creating a new identity is possible. In terms of positioning, both have been subjected to their parents' expectations and cultural norms, as well as mislabelling from the Americans. However, in the end, their cultural identity's complexity can be mostly ascribed to their own positioning in the narratives of the past – or more so – their inability to do so successfully. Gogol's return to his father's beloved story *The Overcoat*, however, does suggest that there is a possibility that Gogol will be able to rework his narrative of origin, because

> legacy is to be claimed and infinitely reworked, starting from 'the message of the other', as one can only reconstitute the true point of impact of a book on one's life through

> *Nachträglichkeit* logic of successive readings and interpretations – of early exposure to sequences of events that are understood always too late. (Munos 113)

Although, in Gogol's case his understanding would come too late, Lahiri's novel does feature a character who is able to successfully combine both her cultural heritage and her US citizenship, namely Sonia. Sonia, unlike Gogol, grows up without the issue of having two names, easily partakes in American activities at school and, has a full college experience. Early on, she is deemed to be "the true American" (63) by one of the Bengali friends present during her annaprasan. Yet, Sonia also manages to stay true to her Indian heritage, as she moves in with her mother after her father's death. Unlike Moushumi and Gogol, Sonia is able to assert her independence without having to server ties with either side of her identity and her past (Ranasinha 202).

In short, the cultural identity of second-generation migrants is more complicated, because they lack a direct link to the past, which is still present in the lives of first-generation migrants as portrayed in Lahiri's *The Namesake*. They are also more subjected to positioning, especially from their parents. However, the real complexity lies in their own ability to rework the narratives of the past into the present-day situation, as they actively have to rework and reconstruct the past in order to fully comprehend their own sense of self. Whereas their parents identify as American Indians, it is up to second-generation migrants to find a kind of hybrid form that forsakes neither one or the other and that also does not place one above the other. As such, their cultural identity and its formation is much more complicated than their parents', but not impossible. Additionally, although both generations are subjected to positioning, second-generation migrants are more affected by misnaming, racialisation, and misreading because it ends up putting them in a box in which they do not feel comfortable. First-generation migrants like Ashima and Ashoke are far more aware of their differences and are able to accept their positioning because they have come to terms with their own foreignness and have accepted that

the US has different views. In Gogol and Moushumi's case, their sense of self differs from what society thinks of them. They may look Indian, but their desire is to be free of this classification and to be able to decide for themselves who they are.

Chapter 4

(Post-)Colonial Identities in Kiran Desai's *The Inheritance of Loss*

In this chapter, I argue that Kiran Desai's *The Inheritance of Loss* focuses on a (post-)colonial structure of identity. As the novel is mostly set in India, the characters' identity development is largely determined by the effects of India's colonial past and its independence since 1947. Despite the shifting power relations, the effects of social stratification are still deeply felt by the characters and affect their decision making within the novel, while also controlling their lives in terms of available opportunities and possible narratives.

In *The Inheritance of Loss*, Desai employs a narrative technique that connects both the Third World and the First World[1] through the travel narratives of Jemubhai Patel and Biju. Although these travels take place in colonial and post-colonial times, the connection functions to underscore the lasting and problematic historical continuities in terms of racialisation and class distinctions (Sabo 376-377). According to Sabo, the novel's title does not suggest "an unquestioning embrace of Euro-American history and values, but a critical reading of its continuing effects in our contemporary world marked by inequalities, suffering, and loss on psychic, social, and cultural levels" (379). To support my analysis, I apply Bhabha's theory of mimicry to the character of the judge Jemubhai Patel. His mimesis proves to be unsuccessful, because it is impossible for an Anglicised colonial subject to be considered fully English (Bhabha 125). While his Anglicisation does gain him respect and affluence, it does not shield him from the changing sentiments towards Anglicised Indians in independent India. Additionally, his Anglicisation results in a problematic cultural identity, as he adopts the strong colonial belief that anything Indian must inherently be inferior to the English culture or any

[1] Although I am aware of the historical meaning of these metaphors as they have been used during the Cold War and colonial times, Bhabha continues to use these metaphors while theorising post(-colonialism). Therefore, I will use these terms throughout this chapter, as this older terminology still impacts present-day thinking, in terms of exploitation and status, in Western countries. For this reason, Bhabha writes: "The challenge to modernity comes in redefining the signifying relation to a disjunctive 'present': staging the past as *symbol*, myth, memory, history, the ancestral – but a past whose iterative *value as sign* reinscribes the 'lessons of the past' into the very textuality of the present that determines both the identification with, and the interrogation of, modernity" (354).

other colonial power for that matter. Where the judge's stay in the UK enables him to rise in station, the same cannot be said for the cook's poor son, Biju, who struggles to better his situation in the US after India has become independent. According to Bhabha, "[i]n the postcolonial text the problem of identity returns as a persistent questioning of the frame, the space of representation, where the image – missing person, invisible eye, Oriental stereotype – is confronted with its difference, its Other" (66). This confrontation with the 'other' is, however, applicable to both Jemubhai and Biju, as neither of them can escape racism. What will be of much more importance in distinguishing between Jemubhai and Biju's story is the role of social stratification. Therefore, I analyse the relation between Jemubhai and Biju's travels in light of social stratification, mimicry, and globalisation in both colonial and post-colonial settings. These social phenomena are of importance to the characters' cultural identity, as they have a largely negative influence on it.

In addition, I analyse Sai and Gyan's cultural identity, as both of them also belong to different social classes and, as such, are also subjected to different identity issues related to the changing times in which they live. As the world portrayed in Desai's novel is highly uneven and socially stratified, yet deals with historical disruption, it also enunciates "a process by which objectified others may be turned into subjects of their history and experience" (Bhabha 225). It opens up a world in which "new forms of identification … may confuse the continuity of historical temporalities, confound the ordering of cultural symbols, traumatize tradition" (Bhabha 257). In a world in which there is a strong belief in the colonising countries' superiority, both by the colonisers themselves, as well as by the colonised who have internalised this idea, India's independence enables new narratives to be written or to emerge, although, simultaneously, the disruptive power of the English continues to exist alongside this attempted revolution, which puts into question the impact and effectiveness of these new narratives. This growing tension between the Anglicised and privileged elite and the newly emerging

nationalistic and traditionally suppressed lower classes, therefore, begs for a re-evaluation of one's cultural identity.

4.1 Jemubhai's Cultural Identity: Mimicry, Fetishism, and Alienation

Firstly, I consider the impact of social stratification, mimicry, and fetishism on Jemubhai Patel's cultural identity. In 1939, at the age of twenty, Jemubhai Patel leaves his ancestral home in Piphit behind and travels to Cambridge for education. He comes from a poor family, but his parents have managed to save up for his education. Already from the start, Jemubhai seems to have a negative outlook on his life in Piphit as he "felt a piercing fear … for the foolish faith with which he had lived [there]" (36). The world he lived in was "trivial" (36) and he feels no need to throw the decorated coconut into the waves, so that "his journey might be blessed by the gods" (36). Without even having set foot in England, Jemubhai already holds the English in higher esteem than the Indians. He tosses his mother's food overboard and is shocked when his Indian friend hails a *white* porter to carry a "brown person's bags" (36). Thus, Jemubhai is already aware of the colonial hegemony, internalises it, and tries to subdue his own Indianness.

Once in Cambridge, Jemubhai retreats into solitude; "[t]he solitude became a habit, the habit became the man, and it crushed him into a shadow" (39). He is confronted with racist comments, such as "[p]hew, he stinks of curry!" (39) and, as a result, he becomes increasingly estranged and starts to find "his own skin odd-coloured, his accent peculiar" (40). Finally, he feels "barely human at all" (40). His travels to Cambridge leave him utterly confused and alienated. He loses his sense of self and, consequently, completely isolates himself. Yet, instead of forming a hatred for the English who do not accept him and other him, he begins to loathe everything Indian and starts to mimic the English ways. According to Bhabha, "mimicry emerges as the representation of a difference that is itself a process of disavowal" (122). This idea is inherently ambivalent, because it acknowledges that, Jemubhai is different from the English, while at the same time trying to disavow this difference. By using mimicry, Jemubhai

hopes to set himself apart from other Indians and to establish a name for himself. He is, however, aware of the consequences that this mimicry might have, as he says that "[h]e worked at being English with the passion of hatred and for what he would become, he would be despised by absolutely everyone, English and Indians, both" (119). Jemubhai's mimicry is, thus, not a way for him to please the English, but a way to create an identity that enables him to distinguish himself from the others. Yet, the desired effect, to be English, does not work for Jemubhai, because his mimesis is flawed in a sense that the colonial subject can never be fully English (Bhabha 125). Therefore, Bhabha's theory about the mimic man already raises some questions in terms of identity. Jemubhai's narrative shows that he is able to distinguish himself, but that he loses himself in the process. Mimicry is, however, not the only process that leads to this loss of self.

Hand in hand with mimicry, goes the idea of fetishism, which "gives access to an 'identity' which is predicated as much on mastery and pleasure as it is on anxiety and defence, for it is a form of multiple and contradictory belief in its recognition of difference and disavowal of it" (Bhabha 107). Due to the racism and feelings of inferiority that Jemubhai is confronted with, mimicry and fetishism allow him to create an identity that both limits the amount of racism that he faces, as well as give him the power he so much desires. The problem with this identity is that it is at once alienating and confrontational (Bhabha 110). Although Jemubhai's mimicry is successful in a sense that it gains him a position at the ICS, it becomes problematic when he returns to his wife, Nimi, and when India becomes independent in 1947.

When he returns to India as an Anglicised and successful man, he feels like "a foreigner" (167), "[o]nly his digestion dissented and told him he was home" (167). When Nimi is overcome by greed and takes her husband's powder puff, it becomes clear that Jemubhai's identity is confrontational and that "colour [is] the cultural/political sign of inferiority or degeneracy, skin … its natural 'identity'" (Bhabha 114). The powder that Jemubhai puts on his

face to become white is made fun of by his Indian family, while he regards it as a symbol of his Anglicised manners. This fundamental difference is highlighted in the following lines: "He had thought they would have the good taste to be impressed and even a little awed by what he had become, but instead they were laughing" (168). Although Jemubhai's mimicry and fetishism have resulted in a higher regard of himself and a higher status in India, his family mocks his obsession with the powder puff "and fails to see [it] as anything else but evidence of his effeminacy" (Poon 551). As a result, he again intensely loathes the Indians and abuses his wife. At a certain point, he even says to her: "Don't show your face outside … People might run from you screaming" (173). Jemubhai is extremely worried that his wife's unanglicised ways will jeopardise his position. It is because of this fear that Nimi is eventually thrown out of the house, pregnant, to go and live with her parents again, as she had unknowingly become part of the Nehru welcoming committee at the Cantonment Railway Station. Jemubhai always left his wife at home, unlike the other husbands, because she could pose a threat to his position. This treatment is, however, a result of his own shame and hatred, as he says that "[h]e would teach her the same lessons of loneliness and shame he has learned himself" (170). Therefore, this obsession with status and position results in both loathsomeness towards the Indians and towards himself, as Jemubhai is constantly aware of his own difference while trying to avow it.

Comparably, his Englishness becomes a problem in post-colonial India, as the Nepalis are planning an insurgency and are "fed up with being treated like a minority in a place where they were the majority" (9). Jemubhai is regarded as an upholder of the colonial oppression that the Nepalis faced under British rule. Yet, the comfort and protection that his Anglicised identity afforded him, is no longer of any use now that the English have left. Jemubhai's house in Cho Oyu, previously owned by a Scottish colonist, becomes a symbol of the diminishing power of the Indian elite that profited from colonial politics: "The structure of the house seemed fragile in the night – just a husk. The tin roof rattled in the wind. When Sai moved her foot, her toes

went silently through rotted fabric" (34). Although aware of the changing times, "selective memories of England nursed by the village's elite characters signal economic entitlement, agency, and power" (Loh 310). Jemubhai keeps up his adopted forms of Englishness by eating English food, using cutlery, and by placing English poets above Indian ones. When the Nepalese tutor, Gyan, comes over for dinner, the judge recognises his younger self in him, and reminds himself of his own supposed foolishness. As a result, he thinks of Gyan as a "[d]amn fool" (113), because he sees someone who does not know enough about the English in order to become successful in a world in which they had the upper hand. Gyan is, however, not interested in becoming more English and is deeply angered by the judge's outburst. Consequently, Gyan is taken in by the nationalistic Gorkha movement. He says that

> [i]t maddened him that people lived here in this enormous house and property, taking hot baths, sleeping alone in spacious rooms, and he suddenly remembered the cutlets and boiled peas dinner with Sai and the judge, the judge's "Common sense seems to have evaded you, young man." (162)

Gyan's reaction to the judge's wealth and his opinion of him results in Gyan telling the GNLF about the house in Cho Oyu and that they can find guns there. Here it becomes clear that Jemubhai's mimicry and obsession with the English is dangerous. Post-colonial India no longer offers the kind of protection that colonial India did for the affluent villagers of Cho Oyu. Due to the historical changes, boundaries start to blur, which causes the GNLF to be bolder, while people like Jemubhai lose the respectability that they held within society. In fact, it is this position that now threatens the elite's existence and their quiet and comfortable life: "The wealth that seemed to protect them like a blanket was the very thing that left them exposed" (242).

While Jemubhai may still hold a certain amount of power over the police, this power only does more harm than good. When Jemubhai's house is raided by some boys from the

GNLF, the police promises to find the culprits. Instead, they falsely accuse and abuse a poor and local villager. When the villager's family find out the truth, they decide to sneak up on the house and take away the one thing that Jemubhai deeply cares for: his dog Mutt. In losing Mutt, "[t]he judge had lost his clout" (292) and "remembered all of a sudden why he had gone to England and joined the ICS; it was clearer than ever why – but now that position of power was gone, frittered away in years of misanthropy and cynicism" (292). Subsequently, Jemubhai's behaviour completely changes: "He was undoing his education, retreating into the superstitious man making bargains, offering sacrifices, gambling with fate, cajoling, daring whatever was out there" (301). He starts to think about his past and wonders whether "he had killed his wife for the sake of false ideals" (308). He finally comes to the realisation of what mimicry and fetishism have resulted in and becomes aware of the fact that whatever wealth and comfort his ideals may have accumulated in, they can never weigh up to the loss he has to suffer because of it. As such, the novel also shows that, despite the elite position of the villagers of Cho Oyu, their English security blanket no longer offers the right kind of protection and that even their acquired Englishness is an inheritance of loss. In becoming the mimic man, he completely erases his own cultural identity which has only resulted in an identity filled with self-loathing, constant awareness of difference, and an extremely alienated and confrontational way of life in which everyone near and dear to him are pushed away. Yet, due to the dominant ideology of colonial superiority, his mimicry and fetishism were not so much a choice, but rather a way for him to survive. Therefore, Sabo argues that "the novel suggests that diasporic self-definition needs to take into account a larger context, in this case, colonial and regional politics" (383). Jemubhai eventually realises what kind of control the colonial narrative had over him and, thus, "he hoped an unacknowledged system of justice was beginning to erase his debts" (308) and that, perhaps, Sai could make up for his own foolishness and not follow into his footsteps.

4.2 Biju's Cultural Identity: Social Stratification, Globalisation, and (Post-)Colonialism

Another character who finds himself travelling away from India, is Biju, the son of Jemubhai Patel's cook. Although both Biju and Jemubhai come from a poor family, Jemubhai's education allowed him to get a position in the ICS with which he could gain a higher social status. This is not the case for Biju. According to Gikandi, "[p]ostcolonial elites are, by virtue of their class, position or education, the major beneficiaries of the project of decolonization" (29). This is, for example, true for Noni and Lola's daughters. Biju's story, however, highlights how the novel "debunks the myth of the USA as a land of opportunity for postcolonial immigrants who undergo not only racial discrimination, but also economic exploitation within their own diasporic communities" (Sabo 385). Through Biju's experience it becomes clear that social stratification still plays a significant role in post-colonial settings, despite the emergence of globalisation and cosmopolitanism. For this reason, Jackson says that "[a]lthough Gikandi views cosmopolitanism as a generous attitude, he still associates it with elitism" (34). This section, therefore, focuses on how Biju's social status takes away his opportunity to become a cosmopolitan and globalised citizen.

Firstly, Biju's struggles to get into the US are nothing like Jemubhai Patel's trip to the UK. Whereas Jemubhai was able to go the UK because his family managed to save up for it, Biju is much more dependent on fate: "What would make the decision? It was a whim; it was not liking your face, forty-five degrees centigrade outside and impatience with all Indians, therefore; or perhaps merely the fact that you were in line after a yes, so you were likely to be a no" (183). In addition, it is immediately made clear what position Biju has in the hierarchy visible at the embassy: "wolf-faced single men first, men with families second, women on their own and Biju, and last, the decrepit" (183). Poon, therefore, writes that "Biju is manifestly not earmarked for privilege, but is one of the millions who are individually dispensable but collectively crucial for the running of this more amorphous and acephalous system" (553),

while someone like the judge had become privileged because of his education which was granted to him "in order to ensure the reproduction of colonial and then national power" (553). Biju's story highlights "the proliferation of the self-interest of market globalism leads to the further marginalisation of the powerless" (Ranasinha 76) and shows that, although India has become independent and is no longer colonized, its people continue to be exploited much like the Nepalis were under British rule in India.

Furthermore, Biju is confronted with the same kind of hierarchy and racism that Jemubhai faced, but he deals with this in a different manner than the judge. From the beginning, it is made clear that even in America, the colonial hegemony, as well as the older caste system, are still present. The first restaurants that Biju works at call attention to this:

> *Biju at Baby Bistro.* Above, the restaurant was French, but below in the kitchen it was Mexican and Indian … Biju at Le Colonial for the authentic colonial experience. On top, rich colonial, and down below, poor native … On to the Stars and Stripes Diner. All American flag on top, all Guatemalan flag below. (21)

Some restaurants even reflect their colonial past: "What were they thinking? Do restaurants in Paris have cellars full of Mexicans, desis, and Pakis? No, they do not. What are you thinking? They have cellars full of Algerians, Senegalese and Moroccans" (23). The hierarchical structures of the restaurants become a metaphor for both the ordering of the undocumented migrant's existence, as well as their widespread exploitation (Ranasinha 77). Besides being exploited, Biju is also the victim of racist remarks that echo the kind of remarks that Jemubhai was confronted with. One of the restaurant's owners, for example, says that Biju smells and that "she had hoped for men from the poorer parts of Europe" (48), as they would, at least, "have something in common with them like religion, and skin color" (48). This racialisation is something Biju is very much aware of as he himself even notices that "[w]hite people looked clean because they were whiter; the darker you were … the dirtier you looked" (186). Yet,

Jackson writes that "the novel suggests that in the contemporary world, the benefits of globalization accrue to those who are privileged not by nationality or ethnicity or even gender, but by social class" (32). Additionally, it is important to note that social class gives access to education and other facilities that people like Biju are unable to attain. From the following passage, in which Biju has to deliver Chinese take-away to a couple of Indian-American women, the suggestion is made that mimicry still plays a crucial role in deciding who gets to be successful and who does not, as these women subdue parts of their cultural heritage:

> They had a self-righteousness common to many Indian women of the English-speaking upper-educated … They took to short hair quickly, were eager for Western-style romance, and happy for a traditional ceremony with lots of jewelry … They were poised; they were impressive; in the United States, where luckily it was still assumed that Indian women were downtrodden, they were lauded as extraordinary. (50)

These women, unlike Jemubhai, are able to combine both their Indian heritage and the American way of life. Yet, their social class has allowed them to do so; a luxury that Biju does not have.

While this kind of affluence and success turned Jemubhai into a flawed mimic man who completely lost his own identity and wallowed in self-loathing, Biju, instead, holds onto his traditional upbringing and has more nationalistic tendencies. Instead of blaming those in power, Biju, "in awe of white people, who arguably had done India great harm" (77) , pours out "a lack of generosity regarding almost everyone else, who had never done a single harmful thing to India" (77). Moreover, Biju argues that "[o]ne should not give up one's religion, the principles of one's parents and their parents before them. No, no matter what. You had to live according to something" (136). In many ways, Biju's statement is the opposite of what Jemubhai has done. However, Biju's wish "to live within a narrow purity" (137) does not solve his problems and

feelings of loneliness. Still, he thinks working at a restaurant that is run by Indians, a kind of "generic India" (145), would be the best way to live according to his own principles.

Harish-Harry's Gandhi Café is, however, anything but ideal. As the owner's name already suggests, Harish-Harry is caught between two cultures: Indian and American. Yet, in practice, he "fails to embrace cultural diversity" (Sabo 386). Sabo notes that he "deliberately excludes other South Asian diasporic peoples and exploits even Indian illegals like Biju, thus endorsing a parochial definition of diasporic identity and community" (386). He is unable to find the right balance between the two cultures. He is rather aggressive towards his staff but changes his manner almost immediately when an "American patron" (147) walks through the door. In addition, the "support for the cow shelter was in case the Hindu version of the afterlife turned out to be true" (147). Harish-Harry is, thus, not so much concerned with principles and ideals, but "tried to keep on the right side of power, tried to be loyal to so many things that he himself couldn't tell which one of his selves was authentic, if any" (148). When Biju realises this, he says that "[t]here was no purity in this venture. And no pride. He had come home to no clarity of vision" (148). His attempt at finding a sense of belonging through narrow purity, thus, proves to be unsuccessful.

Finally, Biju considers returning to India, as life in the US starts to take a toll on him. Despite the proclamation made by the man from the embassy, "[y]ou are the luckiest boy in the whole world" (187), all Biju feels is loneliness, alienation, fear, and neglect. This neglect and disregard for things is reflected in the metaphor of the rice bag: "In India almost nobody would be able to afford this rice, and you had to travel around the world to be able to eat such things where they were cheap enough that you could gobble them down without being rich; and when you got home to the place where they grew, you couldn't afford them anymore" (191). Through this metaphor, the reality of exploitation becomes visible, as well as its unfairness. Moreover, it mirrors Biju's journey from India to America in a sense that he will not be able to afford this

rice after his homeward journey, meaning that he has been unsuccessful in terms of earning a better living. Unlike Biju, his friend Saeed Saeed seems to be able to make it in America, and Biju even notes that "[t]he country recognized something in Saeed, he in it, and it was a mutual love affair" (79). Saeed proclaims that "[*f*]*irst* I am Muslim, then I am Zanzibari, *then* I *will BE* American" (136). Biju can, however, only get himself to ask questions such as: "What was India to these people? How many lived in the fake versions of their countries, in fake versions of other people's countries? Did their lives feel as unreal to them as his own did to him?" (267). Where America opened doors for Saeed Saeed to reinvent himself, for Biju it only felt like "a space that should have included family, friends, he was the only one displacing air" (268). America only expanded his "self-consciousness, his self-pity" (268). In India, he could at least "relinquish this overrated control over his own destiny" (268). Although Biju is told that this is still a world where "one side travels to be a servant, and the other travels to be treated like a king" (269), Biju's social status would not have allowed him to become like the latter, unless he were to constantly reinvent himself, which has only been a burden to him (Ranasinha 81).

At the end of Biju's story, he finally comes home and "felt himself shrink back to size, the enormous anxiety of being a foreigner ebbing" (300). It is here, in India, that "his vision unblurred and he found that he could see clearly" (300). Unfortunately, Biju is robbed by the GLNF on his way home and arrives there, "worst of all, without his pride. Back from America with far less than he'd ever had" (317). This tragic ending only serves to highlight that, no matter what Biju would have tried to do, he is stuck in the loop of poverty. According to Ranasinha, "there was no system to soothe the unfairness of things" (82). Biju had, simply, "in his innocence, done just what his father had, in his own innocence, told him to do" (311). In going to America, Biju was condemned to a similar fate as many of his own family members over the generations; leaving for work while longing to be with people elsewhere. Although Biju's story seems to end very tragically and only reaffirms that social status determines what

possibilities one has in life, Biju is able to return to his father and is heartily welcomed. In comparing Biju's ending to that of Jemubhai, one could say that, in the end, Biju might be in a better place than the distressed judge.

4.3 Sai and Gyan's Cultural Identity: Class Divisions, (Post-)Colonialism, and Reconciliation

Like Jemubhai and Biju, Sai and Gyan can also been seen as foils. Both characters are almost the same age, but their background differs immensely. Sai is part of the privileged society of Cho Oyu, whereas Gyan's poor family put all their faith in the education of their son. As a result, Sai and Gyan's worlds collide. Their class distinctions and the aftermath of India's independence, however, make their relationship complicated. Desai's novel, nevertheless, ends on a hopeful note in which the suggestion is made that perhaps Sai will be able to overcome some of the boundaries formed by social stratification and colonial history.

Firstly, it is important to look at the differences between Sai and Gyan's upbringing. Sai has lost her parents and is, consequently, brought up in St. Augustine's convent. Here Sai is taught, like her grandfather, that Indianness is comparable to sin. She says that "[t]he system might be obsessed with purity, but it excelled in defining the flavor of sin" (29). She is taught that "cake was better than laddoos, fork spoon knife better than hands, sipping the blood of Christ and consuming a wafer of his body was more civilized than garlanding a phallic symbol with marigolds. English was better than Hindi" (30). Although she has been taught to live according to this ideology, Sai does not become embittered like her grandfather. Although she is unable to speak Hindi, "had no idea how to properly make tea … the Indian way" (6), and has a sense of superiority, she is more open towards people from different social classes, such as the cook and Gyan, and, in the beginning, it even pains her "heart to see how little [the cook] had" (13). Where Jemubhai chooses to isolate himself, Sai wants to "propel herself into the future by whatever means possible or she'd be trapped forever in a place whose time had already passed" (74). Gyan's upbringing differs greatly from Sai's. His ancestors moved from their

village in Nepal to Darjeeling, "lured by the promises of work on a tea plantation" (141). His great-grandfather, however, gets persuaded to join the army, which marks "the beginning of over a hundred years of family commitment to the wars of the English" (142). Unfortunately, like Biju, Gyan's family members never got to enjoy the fruits of their labour. Therefore, Gyan's father decided to "invest their fortunes in schoolteaching" (143). Like Sai, Gyan also wishes to leave India: "He thought of how often he wished he might line up at the American embassy or the British, and leave" (157). He wants to be "[f]ree from history. Free from family demands and the built-up debt of centuries" (157). Sai and Gyan's motives for wanting to leave India do not spring from the same source, however.

Whereas their relation starts out on equal footing, it soon becomes clear that their social classes and the identity crises that follow, lead them both to take different routes. In the beginning, their romance flourishes "and the political trouble continued to remain in the background for them" (140). Gyan even notes that "they had more in common than they thought" (141). According to Poon,

> [i]ntoxicated by their infatuation with each other, both young characters are initially oblivious to their obvious socio-economic, cultural and ethnic differences – differences created and exacerbated by a colonial history of land grabs and map-drawing "despite, ah, despite the mist charging down like a dragon, dissolving, undoing, making ridiculous the drawing of borders." (554)

Gyan is mistaken in comparing Sai's overseas' history with that of his own family. Gyan's family served the English, whereas Jemubhai and Sai's parents were "educated with an eye to the West" (26); "they felt free and brave, part of a modern nation in a modern world" (26). It is, however, important to point out that, despite the Mistry's seemingly better job opportunities, they are also working for the West. Gyan's family, on the other hand, suffers more in the sense that their labour does not result in a better financial situation. Gyan grows more aware of his

position and starts to place Sai above himself, saying that "a being so splendid should not be seated before a shabby textbook" (108). Similarly, Sai is aware of a kind of social hierarchy between them: "It was, she knew herself, a matter of education to learn how to look at a woman, and worried that Gyan wasn't entirely aware of how lucky he was" (124).

Despite them seemingly getting along and falling in love, their social status soon becomes a problem. Gyan starts to become more aware of his position when he stays at Sai's house, especially after having been made fun of by Jemubhai, for which Sai apologises. Gyan is drawn more and more to the GNLF, although, at first, he doubts their intentions: "Were these men entirely committed to the importance of the procession or was there a disconnected quality to what they did? Were they taking their cues from old protest stories or from the hope of telling a new story? Did their hearts rise and fall to something true?" (157). However, eventually, Gyan argues that "[t]hey meant what they were saying; they felt a lack of justice" (157). Finally, "[f[ired by alcohol, he … submitted himself to the compelling pull of history and found this pulse leaping to something that felt entirely authentic" (160). Gyan's newfound fervour for nationalism causes a rift between him and Sai. According to Azmitia,

> [w]hen members of low-status groups become aware of their position in society, they react with anger and, at times, hatred toward members of higher status groups, that is, the "other". They also pressure group members to not assimilate into the mainstream, such as when ethnic minorities pressure their peers to not "act white." (5)

This is exemplified when Gyan starts to criticise Sai for celebrating Christmas, arguing that "[they are] Hindu" (163) and that they "are like slaves … running after the West" (163). He argues that all that Sai and her family want to do "is copy" (164) or mimic the English, and that he is stuck "*[b]ecause of people like [them]!*" (164). When Gyan calls Sai a "little fool" (174), his words echo those of Nimi when she told the judge that he was "the one who [was] stupid"

(304). Both Gyan and Nimi understand that the elite's faith in colonial power and Englishness is a farce, which will be confirmed when the Gurkhas enter their homes (Loh 313).

While Gyan's words cause Sai to re-evaluate her own cultural identity, Gyan's own nationalism is also put into question. Whereas Sai becomes aware of her privileged position and starts to experience negative emotions similar to "white guilt" (Azmitia 5), Gyan's feelings of purity echo Biju's sentiments and how those failed to ground his identity, as "with purity for a cause came ever more acute worries of pollution" (175). Sai realises that "she was only the center of herself, as always, and a small player playing her part in someone else's story" (175). Moreover, Sai comes to understand that "her own delivery to Kalimpong in such a manner was merely part of the monotony, not the original. The repetition had willed her, anticipated her, cursed her, and certain moves made long ago had produced all of them" (199). She "knew nothing of the people who had belonged here first" (199). According to Azmitia, these feelings are all part of 'white guilt'; anxiety, shame, but also "ambivalence by denying the significance of race, gender, social class, or any other privilege in their lives, justifying their privileged position, or working to improve the lives of lower status groups" (5). This justification comes to the fore when Sai reads an old book saying that "[a]lthough you may have acquired the habits and manners of the European, have the courage to show that you are not ashamed of being an Indian, and in all such cases, identify yourself with the race to which you belong" (199). This angers Sai and she reasons that "the child shouldn't be blamed for a father's crime" (199). She, however, wonders whether "the child should therefore also enjoy the father's illicit gain" (199). In asking herself this question, Sai hints at the title of the novel where her own social status is not so much her own fault, but the inheritance of loss. However, Sai does uphold the practices of her family and clings to a sense of superiority. This sense of superiority comes back when she sees Gyan's house and only feels distaste for herself: "How had she been linked to this

enterprise, without her knowledge or consent?" (256). Her expression is caught by Gyan, who only takes this to be a confirmation of his own thoughts.

Gyan's own nationalism is, however, also criticised, as "Desai explores the reassertion of nationalism within the context of the intensification of globalisation and captures the apparent paradox and the contradictions of nation/nationalism in a globalised world" (Ranasinha 76). It is said that "[e]very contradiction history or opportunity might make available to them, every contradiction they were heir to, they desired. But only as much, of course, as they desired purity and a lack of contradiction" (259). Desai's novel, thus, also underscores the ambiguous desires of the Gorkha movement as "they both resent and desire the material privileges and opportunities that a classed access to an anglicised background entails" (Ranasinha 69). For this reason, Peter Jay argues that both "nationalism and globalization conspire to produce 'the dead-end' that the novel's characters face, and that the novel's vision is essentially bleak" (Qtd. in Poon 555). Sai, however, worries that in Gyan's nationalistic tendencies, he "would find adulthood and purity in a quest for a homeland and she would be left forever adolescent, trapped in shameful dramatics" (265). This is contested by the novel, when it is said that "[t]he trouble was that he'd tried to be part of the larger questions, tried to become part of politics and history. Happiness had a smaller location" (272). The novel, here, returns to the idea that "diasporic self-definition needs to take into account a larger context, in this case, colonial and regional politics" (Sabo 383). Therefore, Gyan's hope of finding an identity and something to live for in nationalism fails to assert his identity and, instead, leaves him confused and lost.

In the end, Sai realises that "[h]er crying, enough for all the sadness in the world, was only for herself" (322-323), and she pledges that "[n]ever again could she think there was only but one narrative and that this narrative belonged only to herself, that she might create her own tiny happiness and live safely within it" (323). According to Ranasinha, "Sai's willingness to

allow empathy to puncture her previously separate sense of selfhood provides the only glimmer of hope in this bleak novel" (73-74). In transcending her own immature feelings of self-righteousness, superiority, and self-importance, Sai opens a door to a place where loss can be transformed into an understanding of those around you and to take into consideration that larger context that Sabo argues the diasporic self-definition is in need of (383). Yet, she still wants to leave India behind, as "Cho Oyu was still full of shadow" (323). Her wish to find happiness, then, only suggests that "the answer to [the] ethical and political questions hinges on the protagonists' class status and cultural capital" (Sabo 387). Sabo, therefore, argues that "[w]hereas Sai feels she belongs to a larger world, Biju's diasporic consciousness is one of exclusion and discrimination" (387). However, if one were to disregard the value of material goods, Biju's happiness can be found in the relationship he has with his father; a loving relationship that Sai is unable to find in India. In short, the role of social stratification continues to play a crucial role in deciding what narratives are available to the characters in Desai's novel. In addition, post-colonialism allows for different stories to emerge, while, at the same time, showing new ways in which the colonial structure continues to pervade into new places or how it remains of importance in decolonized areas. The novel, however, ends on the hopeful note that happiness and belonging can be found in small places, not in the larger-than-life questions.

Conclusion

This thesis set out to argue that Jhumpa Lahiri and Kiran Desai employ different narrative techniques to highlight the various aspects of cultural identity as a complex and multifaceted concept. Whereas Desai's novel highlights the postcolonial structure of its characters' identities, Lahiri's novel focuses on the concept of *diaspora identities,* as defined by Stuart Hall; her short stories, on the other hand, centre around the interplay between social and personal identities, as put forward by Margarita Azmitia. In analysing the three texts, I have looked at the issues that constitute a cultural identity's complexity, as well as search for a possible solution offered by the authors within their narratives.

All three literary works highlight that the cultural identity's complexity can be ascribed to its dynamic nature. Cultural identity is not something that is completely grounded and shared by everyone from a certain social group, but, instead has to adapt to numerous situations and can be influenced by many different elements. Each of the three literary works has shown this in their own way, whether that is through an exploration of the adaptability and transformability of gender norms, the differences between first- and second-generation migrants in terms of positioning, or through a study of the impact of (post-)colonialism.

Additionally, all three narratives prove that there is no such thing as 'the Indian or Indian American identity'. Everyone has to define their cultural identity in their own terms, while keeping in mind that history has a lasting effect on this identity which cannot be disregarded or done away with. As such, the formation of a cultural identity will always require a reworking or re-evaluation of all the components that constitute a cultural identity. The novels and the short story collection show that this is a difficult and strenuous process.

All three works do leave the reader with a glimmer of hope, as they all suggest that the closest thing to a solution to this strenuous and difficult process would be a hybridised sense of identity. No matter where the characters find themselves, the suggestion is made that through

accepting a hybrid and diverse cultural identity formation, most characters can or would be able to find happiness and a sense of belonging. Unfortunately, there are multiple implications to this solution. Firstly, Desai's novel shows that, due to social stratification, this option is not available for everyone. People like Biju have been put in such a position that they are unable to escape their poverty, even when they try to assimilate and work hard. India's own caste system and the continuing impact of India's colonial past haunts these layers of society. Even developments such as globalisation and cosmopolitanism, which are often seen as positive developments, can lead to problems such as the exploitation of these lower classes. Furthermore, in terms of gender norms, hybridity creates an imaginary ideal for Indian(-American) women and men in that it becomes an unattainable ideal that is inherently conflicting, as it continues to exist alongside traditional views on gender norms. Similarly, second-generation migrants become conflicted when they are confronted with two opposing cultural ideologies. In addition, marriages between people with contrasting views on assimilation and hybridity tend to fall apart or lead to unhappiness. Yet, in some of these cases, hybridity is still the best option, because disavowing one cultural background and trying to live by the ideals of just one, causes a rift in a person's sense of self and could lead to a constant feeling of incompleteness. Creating a cultural identity from scratch is unadvisable, as it leaves one without anything to ground itself in.

As someone who has had to go through a similar process of figuring out one's cultural identity, I can concur with the idea of a hybridised sense of identity. Throughout high school, much like Gogol, I tried to be as Dutch as I could possibly be, thinking that this would give me the best opportunities to get on in life. Yet, by the time I went to university, I realised that what I was I was doing, was essentially supressing a part of myself that had an equal right to be part of my life and that I should be proud of. After accepting that other part of myself, my relationship with my mother also flourished. My mother had to go through the traumatic

experience of losing her father in war that was indirectly caused by British Imperialism,[2] she had to flee from her homeland to a completely new country, and she then had to adapt to a culture that was drastically different from what she was used to. This is a story that I am now proud to tell. Like many of the women in Lahiri's works, my mother deeply loved Sri Lanka and still misses it dearly. Yet, she has also been able to adapt to Dutch culture and has found a way to bring a part of her Tamil heritage with her, just like I have managed to find a way to reconcile and appreciate both cultures, even when their ideals can seem quite contradicting. My own experience has made me realise the importance and complicatedness of negotiating a hybrid identity. From this realisation, came the wish to approach this question of hybridity and cultural identity from a scholarly and theoretical perspective by analysing three literary works addressing this issue. My hope is that this thesis stresses the importance of exploring cultural identity from an academic angle and that it helps others gain insight into the difficulties that many people still face today and how patience and understanding can help ease the burden for those having to go through this difficult process.

In short, this thesis has argued that cultural identity is a complicated and multifaceted concept which manifests itself in the many different approaches taken by the authors of the literary works to articulate its dynamic and protean nature. Although the novels and the short story collection offer hybridity as a possible solution to this complexity, in order to prevent a loss of self, there are significant implications to this solution. All cultural identities are different and not one process of identity formation is identical, despite the possibility of a similar cultural background. History and changing environments have a lasting impact on the way in which people are perceived and see themselves, which is why forming a cultural identity is ever-changing and diverse.

[2] See "The Sri Lankan Civil War and Its History, Revisited in 2020" for more information. https://hir.harvard.edu/sri-lankan-civil-war/.

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