

22222

FNG



**The Search for Ethnic Identity in Selected Novels of
Bharati Mukherjee, Jhumpa Lahiri, and Monica Ali.**

A Thesis

by

Nahreen Khan

I.D. 2005-3-93-004

Submitted to the English Department

East West University

Dhaka

In partial fulfillment of the

Requirement for the degree of

MA in English Literature

January 2007.

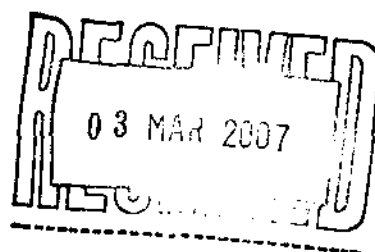
Report-189

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

This study was undertaken for partial fulfillment of the requirements of M.A. degree in English Literature at East West University. I am grateful to teachers in English Department for the encouragement they have provided during the program. This study would not have been possible in such a short time without the inspiring guidance of Professor Fakrul Alam. He helped me in selecting the topic and in editing the thesis. Words are inadequate to express my thanks to him.

My friend Nawsheen was a great help during the ordeal of my thesis writing. I would like to thank my parents who encouraged me in completing my thesis and provided a congenial environment at home. I am also grateful to my grandmother.

Nahreen Khan



Contents

Acknowledgement	i
Introduction	1
Chapter 2	
Theoretical Issues of Ethnic Identity	5
Chapter 3	
The Search for Ethnic Identity in <i>Jasmine</i>	12
Chapter 4	
The Search for Ethnic Identity in <i>The Namesake</i>	22
Chapter 5	
The Search for Ethnic Identity in <i>Brick Lane</i>	33
Chapter 6	
Conclusion	43
Bibliography	49

INTRODUCTION

The dramatic improvement in communication and significant increases in trade and migration has created a global village where people from various nations have come closer to each other. Economists describe this trend as 'globalization'. The intense interaction among people has not only promoted new bonds of unity and friendship but also revived old fears and jealousies. It has at the same time reduced differences among people and reinforced divisions within societies. As an anthropologist rightly points out, "The central problem of today's global interaction is the tension between cultural homogenization and cultural heterogenization" (Appadurai, 30).

Nowhere is the stress of opposing pulls of globalization as painful as in the case of expatriates from developing countries. Economically, in most cases they are better off than their kin left behind. Socially and culturally, they suffer from discrimination and deprivation in their new home. Like the ancient Jews, the immigrants throughout the world try to build 'diasporas' for preserving their identity. The diasporas are small ghettos which though physically located abroad are culturally and socially preserved as replicas of the old homeland. The immigrants are at the same time attracted and repelled by their adopted home. They have fond memories of the home they left behind but at the same time are aware of economic realities that would not permit them to return. The opposing pulls of assimilation in the adopted country and loyalty to the traditions of homeland provoke an intense search for ethnic identity in the diasporas. The agonies

caused by these tensions are mirrored in the 'migrant' or 'diasporic' literature which depicts the life of expatriates and immigrants (Boehmer, 233-43; Kafka, 74-117; Brians, 111-128).

Of late, there has been an explosion of 'diasporic' literature as the movement of immigrants throughout the world has multiplied. Specifically, a number of creative writers of South Asian origin from Salman Rushdie to Monica Ali and Jhumpa Lahiri have portrayed in their works the agonies of the expatriates from this region. An appreciation of this literature is very useful in understanding how people are responding to the shocks of globalization. This will make us understand where we were, are and will be.

This essay seeks to examine the search for ethnic identity in Bharati Mukherjee's *Jasmine*, Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Namesake*, and Monica Ali's *Brick lane*. There are three reasons for focusing on these three women authors of South Asian origin in this analysis. First according to anthropologists, women in the diasporas embody communal identity, home and tradition (Gopinath, 261- 269). The women have a greater role than men in preserving their traditional identity. The writings of women authors, therefore, provide an intimate view of the search for identity. Secondly, the historical evolution of the quest for identity can be better understood in the context of the same ethnic group. Mukherjee, Lahiri, and Ali are all Bengali immigrants from similar cultural and social backgrounds. Finally, the concept of identity in the diasporic writings can vary from one generation to another. It is, therefore, preferable to include both first and second generation immigrant

writers in an analysis of diasporic literature. Mukherjee is a first generation immigrant to the USA. Jhumpa is a second generation immigrant to the USA. Monica Ali is technically a first generation immigrant but in reality a second generation immigrant to UK. The diversity of their background is useful in analyzing the complexity of many dimensions of South Asian diaspora. The essay, will give same weight to each author. It will, therefore, focus on one novel of each author. In selecting the novels, two criteria were used. First, their relevance was considered. Secondly, in order to be consistent, one of the earliest novels of each author was chosen.

This dissertation is divided into six sections. The second section defines and examines theoretical dimensions of ethnic identity. The third chapter briefly narrates the background of Bharati Mukherjee and examines the search for ethnic identity as portrayed in her novel *Jasmine*. The fourth chapter reviews the life and works of Jhumpa Lahiri and analyses the search for ethnic identity in *The Namesake*. The fifth chapter presents the background of Monica Ali and studies the identity crisis in the main characters of *Brick Lane*. The final chapter compares the portrayal of ethnic identity by these writers. The study shows that response of immigrants to adopted homeland is not uniform. It varies among social classes and also between males and females. In fact, the emancipation of woman is a sub-theme in many diasporic novels.

SECTION TWO

THEORETICAL ISSUES ON ETHNIC IDENTITY

The term identity comes from the Latin root *idem* which signifies 'the same' (Gleason, 911). *The Oxford English Dictionary* defines the term identity in the following manner: "the sameness of a person or thing at all times or in all circumstances; the condition or fact that a person or thing is itself and not something else; individuality, personality". According to *Encyclopedia of Social Sciences*, there are two types of identity: personal identity and psychosocial identity. Personal identity varies from individual to individual. It is based on a sense of continuous existence and a coherent memory of a unique self. Personal identity, in the words of William James, is the "real me" as viewed by the individual (61).

Psychosocial identity is not confined to a single individual; it is shared by a group of persons. It includes ethnic and diasporic identity. It is not a mere aggregation of personal identities; it also involves collective identity of the community as a whole.

There are two opposing views on ethnic identity. According to the psychological school, ethnic identity is something internal to a community and it persists through change. It is inherited. It is not modified by social or family environment. Erickson, the proponent of this view, maintains that identity is rooted in the psyche of the community. It is simply there and cannot be changed.

The sociologists reject the notion of an unchanging identity, rooted deep in the psyche of the community. In their view, the concept of identity varies over time and space. The sociologists maintain that ethnic identity is the product of interaction between the individual and society. They argue that ethnic identity is not an indelible stamp on the psyche of the members of a group; it adjusts itself to changing circumstances.

The search for identity is not, however, a universal phenomenon. The members of traditional and static societies are not at all troubled by the issue of identity. As Bharati Mukherjee recalls her own experience, "In Calcutta in the 50s I heard no talk of "identity crisis" – communal or individual. The concept itself – of a person not knowing who he or she is – was unimaginable in our hierarchical, classification-obsessed society. One's identity was fixed, derived from religion, caste, patrimony, and mother tongue" (1996, 2).

The issue of identity assumes importance only when the existing identity is challenged by a new one. This happens in rapidly changing, dynamic, and industrial societies. The old identity is threatened in such societies by fast social changes. Old cities grow larger and new cities emerge. The outsiders from both home and abroad are attracted to new urban settlements. This results in a clash of identities among various ethnic and cultural groups.

The identity crisis becomes more acute in the life of immigrants from developing countries to industrial societies. The economic, cultural and social divide between developing and developed countries is so wide that such immigrants are placed in an unusual fix. They can neither adapt to the new environment nor return to their land of origin. The emigration from traditional societies involves much more than pains of displacement; it also entails a continuous process of defining oneself in the new environment. In these circumstances, the questions, "Who am I? Where do I belong?", "How are we to live in the world?", and "Where should we draw the line between assimilation and preservation of old identity?" preoccupy the minds of the diasporic communities. In this context, an immigrant has been aptly compared to the Greek God Janus "whose gaze is simultaneously directed both forward and backward" (Braziel and Mannur, 9). An immigrant confronts at the same time the country of his past and the habitat of his present, moving back and forth between two poles.

In this painful search for identity, the most important challenge for an immigrant is the definition of "home". Which home is real for him? The home left behind? Or the new home where he lives? In most cases an immigrant is obsessed with the dream of returning to his old home. A home is usually defined in spatial terms as a place where one lives with one's family. It is, however, much more than a geographical entity; it also assumes emotional and social connotations. Home is where a person starts his life. This is what the individual knows first. The world beyond home is unknown to him. Humans reach out to the unknown from the solid base of home and return to the familiar home from the unfamiliar outer world. Home is not a mere physical structure or

a plot of land; it is a web of relationships. It establishes a circle of social relations which demarcates the familiar from the unfamiliar. The first home is the mother. As the individual grows, broad and complex social relations are developed with other members of the family and beyond the family in the neighborhood. These social relations delineate for individuals the boundaries of the known and the near. The concept of home defines the relationship of humans with their physical and social environment. Home is the symbol for the ultimate refuge of the individual and a frame of reference for his self – identification.

The idea of home is best understood from the perspective of its opposite – “non –home” or outside. The symbol of home is more important than the reality. People usually do not think about home when they are at home. According to psychologists, “home does not become an issue until it is no longer there or being lost” (Terkenli, 328). Home becomes subjective and an emotional symbol for the exiles. For them, home is much more than a place of residence; it is the sum of networks of relationships with the known and the familiar. It does not remain confined to individual homes. Personal homes are closely linked to webs of relationships. From the exile’s point of view, home becomes a proxy for homeland embodying the feelings and relationships of a people.

The idea of home for the immigrants is rooted in the past. The immigrants, however, tend to forget that changes are taking place not only in their own lives but also in the home they left behind. With the passage of time, the real home of

immigrants becomes a memory that has no relevance to reality. Salman Rushdie describes it as "Imaginary Homeland". The imaginary homeland is a contradiction in terms. A homeland is the known and familiar world for an individual. It is real and not imaginary. "Imaginary Homeland" is the product of mass migration in the twentieth century. Large scale immigration in the words of Rushdie, created "a radically new type of human beings" (124) in "whose deepest selves strange fusions occur, unprecedented unions between what they were and where they find themselves" (125). The immigrants imagine that their old home is like Keats's Grecian Urn where nothing changes. The returning immigrants discover to their utter surprise that their dear and near ones have either passed away or changed. The new inhabitants in their homeland are unknown. The homeland that is vivid in their mind does not exist any longer.

The real dilemma of an immigrant is that he cannot return to the life he left behind, nor can he forget it. He lives in the world of ideas and memories rather than in places and material things. The illusion of imaginary homeland is more real to him than his life in the diasporas. At the same time, he remains rooted in his present existence. From this perspective, Jhumpa Lahiri compares an immigrant to a person "on a river with foot on two different boats" and each boat "wants to pull him in a separate direction" (http://www.Houghtonmifflinbooks.com/readersguide/Lahiri_namesake.shtml). The one boat is the homeland; the other, the adopted land.

The operation of these opposing pulls is the focus of the fictions on diasporas. In the subsequent sections, the identity crisis of South Asian immigrants to USA and UK

will be illustrated from the novels of Mukherjee, Lahiri and Ali. As Mukherjee is the oldest of the three, the next chapter starts with her novel *Jasmine*.

Works cited

Brazier, J.E. and Mannur, A. "Nation, Migration, Globalization: Points of Contention in Diaspora Studies" Theorizing Diaspora. Ed. Brazier J.E. and Mannur, A. Oxford: Blackwell Publishing Ltd, 2003. 1-22.

Erickson Eric. "Identity, Psychosocial". International Encyclopedia of Social Sciences, 1972.

Lahiri, Jhumpa. A Conversation With Jhumpa Lahiri. 25 October, 2004.
<http://www.foughtonmifflinbooks.com/readersguide/lahiri.namesake.shtml>.

Rushdie, Salman. Imaginary Homeland. London: Granta Books, 1991.

Terkneli, Theno S. "Home As a Region", Geographical Review. Vol.85.No.3 (July 1995), 324-334.

CHAPTER THREE

THE SEARCH FOR ETHNIC IDENTITY IN *JASMINE*

Bharati Mukherjee was born on July 27, 1940 in a traditional Brahmin family of Calcutta. Her parents Sudhir Lal and Bina Mukherjee were wealthy. Mukherjee was exposed to life in the West at a very early age. She moved to Britain with her family at the age of eight and lived in Europe for about three and half years. By the age of ten, Mukherjee knew that she wanted to become a writer and started writing short stories.

She graduated from the University of Calcutta in 1959 and studied English literature and ancient Indian history and culture in Baroda University for her M.A. degree. At the age of twenty one, she came to the USA as a student. She received M.F.A. in creative writing in 1963 and Ph.D. in English and Comparative Literature in 1969 from the University of Iowa. Mukherjee married an American of French Canadian origin and settled in the USA. She started simultaneously a career in teaching and writing. Mukherjee has taught at McGill University, Skidmore College, Queens College and City University of New York. She is currently a professor in the Department of English at the University of California, Berkeley

From the perspective of her writing career, there are three important features in Bharati Mukherjee's life. First, she is a first generation immigrant. She was raised in

India and studied ancient Indian history and culture. She has, therefore, direct knowledge about India. The dilemma of South Asian immigrants which she portrays in her novels is based on her own experience. Secondly, Mukherjee is also at home in the West. She had been exposed to the western life since her childhood. She voluntarily settled in the USA and married an American. She knows well the pleasures of living abroad. Finally, as an academician, she is well-grounded in literary theories. Unlike other writers on diaspora, she could take a long term and objective view of the agonies of immigrants.

According to Alam, there are three phases in Mukherjee's life as an immigrant. In the first phase, she attempts to find her identity in her Indian heritage. In the second phase, she was bitterly disillusioned by racism in Canada where despite being a tenured professor, she felt humiliated. In the final phase, she immigrated to USA and felt proud as "an immigrant, living in a continent of immigrants". In this phase, she differentiates between the expatriates and immigrants. An expatriate, in her view, is someone who is unwilling to pay the price for transformation in the new homeland (1997, 3). An immigrant is one who is willing to face the realities of his adopted home. A sense of hypocrisy infects those who try to defer the inevitability of assimilation. "I am an American", says Bharati Mukherjee, "not an Asian American. My rejection of hyphenation has been called race treachery, but it is really a demand that America deliver the promises of its dream to all its citizens equally" (1997, 1). She explains the implications of her American identity in the following manner:

I maintain that I am an American writer of Indian origin, not because I'm ashamed of my past, not because I'm betraying or distorting my past, but because my whole adult life has been lived here, and I write about the people who are immigrants going through a process of making a home here... I write in the

tradition of immigrant experience rather than nostalgia and expatriation. That is very important; I am saying that the luxury of being a U.S. citizen for me is that I can define myself in terms of things like my politics, my sexual orientation or my education. My affiliation with readers should be on the basis of what they want to read, not in terms of my ethnicity or my race" (Mukherjee quoted in Basbanes).

In another essay, she defends her stance on assimilation of the immigrants in the melting pot of the host country. "My books", says Mukherjee, "have often been read as unapologetic (and in some quarters overenthusiastic) texts for cultural and psychological "mongrelization." It is a word I celebrate" (1996, 1). Mongrelization in her writing is the cross-breeding of Indian and American traditions. In her view, there is no antagonism between her past in India and her present in the USA. Assimilation, for her, is a natural process.

According to Wikipedia, Mukherjee has authored so far seven novels, two collections of short stories and coauthored with her husband Clark Blaise a memoir and a book on Air India crash. Her novels are *The Tiger's Daughter* (1971), *Wife* (1975), *Jasmine* (1989), *The Holder of the World* (1993); *Leave it to me* (1997), *Desirable Daughters* (2002), *The Tree Bride* (2004). This section focuses exclusively on her third novel *Jasmine* which was published in 1989. This novel was written in the third phase of Mukherjee's life when she overcame the nostalgia for the land of her birth and appreciated the new opportunities in the host country. This novel was selected for two reasons. First, the protagonist of this novel is a first generation immigrant. The agony of the immigrants in the host country is a major theme of this novel. Secondly, this novel was written at a stage of her life when Mukherjee had succeeded in defining her own

identity as an immigrant and an American. *Jasmine* contains the well-developed views of Mukherjee on South Asian diaspora.

Jasmine portrays the search for identity by a half-educated Indian widow in the alien environment of the USA. In fact, Jasmine combines in herself quests for identity at two levels. At one level the protagonist of the novel seeks to define her identity as an immigrant from the third world in an industrial society. At another level, she seeks self-awareness as a woman. These two searches, though interrelated, are distinct. Unlike other heroines of Bharati Mukherjee, Jasmine was not born in an elite family. She is a poor peasant girl from the Punjab with very modest education. Born in Hasnapur in India, Jyoti was the most beautiful and clever girl in her family. Yet her life is controlled and dominated by her father and brothers. She was raised in an environment where “village girls are like cattle; whichever way you lead them, that is the way they will go” (46). Life for her back home was a grim struggle for survival. Married at the age of fourteen, she witnessed in her early teens the outbreak of Sikh communal violence which made her a widow. She came to the USA as an illegal immigrant with the religious mission of burning her husband’s dress and herself in front of the College where her husband was scheduled to enroll. This is the beginning of her symbolic trip of transformation and displacement in a new world. She finds that the exploitation and insecurity of women are not confined to third world countries like India; they are equally widespread in the USA. She is raped in the USA and as a fugitive from law moves from job to job. Ultimately, she becomes a personal nurse for a disabled lover. Through the character of Jasmine, Mukherjee shows that women are treated as subordinate in both

developing and developed countries. However, in the USA women has the freedom to choose; in India they have none. At the end of the novel, Jasmine leaves the secure life with her disabled lover Bud and plunges into uncertainty with the hope of a new life in California. Like a free woman, she is proud of her destructive capacities. As she reflects, "Time will tell if I am a tornado, rubble-maker, rising from nowhere and disappearing into a cloud". Implicitly it is suggested that such freedom of women is possible in only industrial societies.

The quest for ethnic identity as depicted by Mukherjee in *Jasmine* is complex. It varies from individual to individual. She presents in this novel two models of immigrants: chauvinist immigrants and assimilating immigrants. A chauvinist immigrant is one who cannot return to his original homeland and want very much to build replicas of their ancestral home in the host country. They want to preserve their pure ethnic identity by resisting any form of adaptation to the host country. This type is represented by Professor Vadhera or "Professorji" in *Jasmine*. By contrast, the assimilating immigrant is one who realizes the futility of little ethnic islands in a vast alien sea. He prefers adaptation to the host country to uncompromising loyalty to old tradition. Jasmine, the protagonist of the novel belongs to the second category.

Compared to Jasmine who welcomes assimilation, Devinder Vadhera is a resolute champion of his Indian identity. He consciously resists all forms of assimilation. He lives in Flushing—"a fortress of Panjabiness" (148) and a neighborhood of New York City resembling the Punjabi city of Jullunder. The immigrants like Vadhera are afraid of

any change. "They let nothing go, lest everything be lost" (162). Vadhera is more Indian than the Indians themselves. He is a typical representative of chauvinistic immigrants.

Unlike Jasmine who is sincere, Vadhera is a hypocrite. He pretends to be a professor and is known in his home as Professorji. In reality, he is an importer and sorter of human hair. The higher castes in India are polluted by touching the hairs of lower castes. He, therefore, lies about his profession. Lacking the courage to face the realities of his life, he wants to hide behind the impregnable wall of Indianness. He is a failure in life but he masks his disappointment under the cloak of his obstinate Indianness. His dilemma was rightly diagnosed by Jasmine: "He needed to work here, but he did not have to like it. He sealed his heart when he'd had left home. His real life was an unlivable land across oceans. He was a ghost, hanging on" (153). Vadhera's inflexible "Indianness" is a mask... In his outward behavior, Vadhera shows that he believes in the superiority of his culture. In reality, it is a defensive mechanism to hide his inferiority complex. He has succumbed to pressures of assimilation in his day to day professional life. He, however, does not acknowledge it.

Compared to Vadhera, who does not recognize the need for change, Jasmine changes continuously. As an illegal immigrant, she has no stable personal identity. Her role and personal identity are changed frequently. Even her name changed with her role. She was Jyoti as a daughter in her father's house and Jasmine in her husband's house. She became a widow, a murderer, Duff's day mummy, Taylor's Jase, and Budd's Jane. The switch from one role to another was not always easy. She changed because she

wanted to survive in an alien land. She was not afraid of change because she was infected by the American spirit which made her “greedy with want and reckless from hope” (241). Jasmine was not, however, forced to undergo the frequent transformations. She had the opportunity to have a sheltered existence in Indian diaspora in Professorji’s house. She disliked this artificial life. “In this apartment of artificially maintained Indianness”, I wanted”, Says Jasmine, “to distance myself from everything Indian, everything Jyoti like”. She fled away from the secure life in Professorji’s house. In defiance of Indian tradition, she became pregnant though she was not married. Jyoti rejected the offer of marriage from her unborn child’s father in Iowa and left with another lover for California. She embraces enthusiastically American ways of life and values.

In Mukherjee’s analysis, there are two factors which facilitated Jasmine’s transformation. First, adaptation to the US is not difficult for Jasmine because she discovers that poor people in India and the USA are alike. She feels at home in the rural USA. As Jasmine says, “The farmers around here are like the farmers I grew up with” (11). She finds that American women like Mother Ripplemeyer who survived the Great Depression could easily identify themselves with her poverty stories. The violence which drove her from homeland is equally widespread in the USA. She is horrified to discover Sukhwinder, the murderer of her husband in a New York Park. She finds more similarities than differences between her past and present. As a result she does not consider the preservation of ethnic identity as a dominant issue in her life. This makes her inclined to assimilation.

Secondly, change in the new environment is rationalized on the basis of Hindu belief in the doctrine of re-incarnation. On the face of it, she appears to be unrepentant for defying traditional values and beliefs. Despite her outward rebellion, she is at bottom a deeply religious person. She has to find a religious justification for what she does. She justifies the transformations in her life on the basis of the Hindu doctrine of rebirth. The Hindus believe that the soul is eternal and it is not destroyed by death. The soul is reborn after death. Every person is trapped in an endless cycle of rebirths. Jasmine fancies that every change she undergoes in the USA is a rebirth for her.

In all her adversities, she seeks solace from her religion. When she kills her rapist, she fancies herself as the goddess Kali. "I was", says Jasmine "walking death. Death incarnate" (119). She justifies her sudden changes in identity as rebirths. In the words of Jasmine, "There are no harmless, compassionate ways to remake oneself. We murder who we were so we can rebirth ourselves in the images of dreams" (29). Each change of identity is based on the murder who we were so we can rebirth ourselves in the images of dreams" (29). Each change of identity is based on the murder of previous identity because there can not be any rebirth without death. She also justifies her wayward life on the basis of the doctrine of fate. "I do believe", says Jasmine, "that extraordinary events can...rip across reincarnation" (127).

There are several unique features of the quest for ethnic identity in Mukherjee's *Jasmine*. First, the characters in *Jasmine* do not want to return to their homeland. They are poor and they know that they do not have much prospect at home. They want to build

“little Indias” in their host country. They want to postpone absorption. Secondly, religion plays an important life in redefining the character of many immigrants. For example, Jasmine is changing continuously but she always justifies her transformations in the light of the teachings of Hindu religion. Thirdly, the quest for identity in the case of women is not limited to ethnicity; it also involves self-awareness of a woman in a male dominated society. Mukherjee shows that women are discriminated not only in traditional societies but also in developed countries. Finally, the chauvinist immigrants despite their noisy idealism are opportunists. For example, Vadhera is a hypocrite who compromises his caste by sorting and trading in human hair but proclaims himself as a champion of traditional caste system. On the contrary, Jasmine defies traditional norms but remains faithful to the spirit of Hindu religion. The outward loyalty to ethnic identity may not, therefore, be the true measure of real faithfulness. The uncompromising ethnic chauvinism is artificial. The actual behavior of the vocal champions of ethnic purity is significantly different from their professed ideals. The ancestral home they want to rebuild in their host country is an invention of their imagination; it does not exist in reality. As Mukherjee says of Vadhera’s home, “They had kept a certain kind of Punjab alive, even if that Punjab no longer existed” (162).

The characters portrayed in Mukherjee’s *Jasmine* are all first generation immigrants. Compared to Mukherjee, Lahiri presents a new dimension of Indian diasporas. Lahiri herself is a second generation migrant. In her novel *The Namesake*, she compares the trials and agonies of first generation immigrants with those of their children.

Works Cited

Alam, Fakhrul. Bharati Mukherjee. New York: Twayne Publishers, 1996.

Mukherjee, Bharati. Jasmine. New York: Grove Press, 1989.

----- "Two Ways to belong to America" New York Times. 22 Sept.1996.

sec. E.13.

----- Bharati Mukherjee. Wikipedia

CHAPTER FOUR

THE SEARCH FOR ETHNIC IDENTITY IN *THE NAMESAKE*

Jhumpa Lahiri was born in July 1967 in London, England. Her formal name at birth was Nilanjana Sudeshna (Wikipedia). Because her given name is too long and difficult to pronounce, she instead uses her nickname Jumpa. She was raised in South Kingston, Rhode Island, USA. Her parents, one a teacher and the other a librarian, emigrated from Bengal to England and subsequently to USA; Lahiri received her B.A. in English literature from Barnard College in 1989. She also received the degrees of M.A. in English, M.A. in Creative Writing, and M.A. in Comparative Literature and a Ph.D. in Renaissance Studies from Boston University. She worked in Provincetown's Fine Arts Work Centre and taught creative writing in Boston University and Rhode Island School of Design. In 2001 she married a Guatemalan-Greek journalist and settled in New York City.

Unlike Mukherjee, Lahiri is a second generation immigrant. While Mukherjee had direct knowledge about her roots, Lahiri learnt about her heritage from her parents and the Indian diaspora in the USA. Mukherjee, an insider to South Asia, opted to become an

outsider. Lahiri, by birth an outsider, consciously sought to acquire the knowledge of an insider. There are therefore marked differences in the ways Mukherjee and Lahiri think about their personal identity. Mukherjee prides himself in being an American. She does not acknowledge any conflict between her Indian and American identities. Lahiri is not sure of her identity. In her mind she has a perennial sense of exile. In a press conference in Calcutta in January 2001, she underlined lack of nostalgia for any particular land. "No country is my motherland. I always find myself in exile in whichever country I travel to, that's why I was tempted to write something about those living their lives in exile."

(<http://www.rediff.com/news2001/jan11jhum.htm>).

Lahiri appreciates the split personality of immigrants. She compares immigrants to persons "on a river with a foot on two different boats. Each boat wants to pull them in a separate direction... They are always hovering, literally straddling two worlds."

(<http://www.Houghtonmifflinbooks.com/readersguide/lahiri.namsake.shtml>). Lahiri is fascinated by the continuous conflict caused by dual identities of immigrants. In her view, the intensity of nostalgia in an immigrant decreases over time but it never disappears. The process of change in the identity of an immigrant is very agonizing. The immigrants themselves are amazed by the transformation they undergo in their new home. As Mala's husband, the protagonist of Lahiri's short story *The Third and Final Continent* marvels at his survival in an alien environment, "I know that my achievement is quite ordinary. I am not the only man to seek his fortune far from home, and certainly I am not the first. Still there are times, I am bewildered by each mile I have traveled, each

meal I have eaten, each person I have known, and in each room I have slept. As ordinary as it all appears, there are times when it is beyond my imagination”.

Compared to most diasporic writers, the canvas and time horizon of Lahiri’s writing is wide. As a second generation of immigrant from South Asia, she appreciates the transformation from one generation to another. Her views on the dilemma of immigrants are reflected in her Pulitzer-winning collection of short stories *Interpreter of Maladies* (1999) and her novel *The Namesake* (2003). This section focuses exclusively on the search for ethnic identity in *The Namesake*.

In *The Namesake*, Lahiri portrays the transformation of identity from one generation to another. The first generation Indian immigrants in this novel are represented by Ashoke and Ashima who immigrated to Boston immediately after an arranged marriage in Calcutta. Ashoke, an engineer by training and a professor by occupation, tries to adapt cautiously to his new environment. Ashima resists everything American and longs to return to Calcutta. They prefer to create little islands of India in their new country. They try in the USA to live like Bengalis. They improvise ethnic food at home. The couple socializes within the closed circle of Bengali diaspora and attends communal functions. They frequently visit Calcutta with their children to renew their acquaintance with their home. Their purpose is two fold. First, they want to perpetuate their ethnic identity. Secondly, they want to instill in their children pride for their heritage. They take extra care to expose their children to their culture.

Lahiri portrays in a subtle manner the motivations behind the enthusiasm of first generation immigrants for their ethnic identity. Outwardly, it may appear that immigrants cling to their ethnic identity because they take pride in their heritage. Lahiri shows that insecurity in the adopted home is more important for immigrants than their pride. The sense of security comes from familiarity with everything in the land of birth. The USA for them is a strange land and sense of security is eroded by unfamiliarity with life here. Both Ashoke and Ashima suffer from insecurity. Ashima, writes Lahiri, "is terrified to raise a child in a country where she is related to no one. Where she knows so little, where life seems so tentative and spare" (6). This sense of insecurity disappears when Ashoke and Ashima visit Calcutta. On the contrary, their children who were raised in America are frightened by Calcutta. One such visit to Calcutta is described as follows: " Within minutes before their eyes Ashoke and Ashima 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. "I am scared Goggles", Sonia whispers to her brother in English seeking his hand and refusing it let go" (81-82). For the first generation immigrants, visit to the original home provides a sense of security. The ancestral home, for the second generation immigrants, is a source of unease and uncertainty.

Another factor which promotes in the first generation immigrants an attachment to their homeland is the sense of obligation to kith and kin left behind. Gogol, the son of Ashoke and Ashima and the protagonist of the novel, realized that his parents' frequent visit to India were not pleasure trips but performance of their obligations to extended

family. As Lahiri writes, “Gogol was aware of an obligation being fulfilled, that it was above all a sense of duty that drew his parents back”. This sense of obligation does not persist in second generation immigrants.

Through the characters of Ashoke and Ashima, Lahiri shows that the split personality of first generation immigrants is real. There is, however, no easy resolution of this duality of mind resulting from conflicting pulls of the past and the present. “For being a foreigner”, writes Lahiri, “Ashima is beginning to realize, a sort of lifelong pregnancy – a perpetual wait a constant burden, a continuous feeling of sorts. It is an ongoing responsibility, a parenthesis in what had been an ordinary life, only to discover that the previous life has vanished, replaced by something complicated and demanding” (49). “A lifelong pregnancy” is a very apt metaphor for describing the identity crisis of immigrants. Like pregnancy, the identity of an immigrant represents the union of opposing forces. The search for identity is also uncomfortable like pregnancy. However, pregnancy is a time-bound process while the search for identity is a never-ending process. “A lifelong pregnancy” is a contradiction in terms. Nevertheless, it is real for first generation immigrants like Ashima.

Through the character of Ashima, Lahiri shows the transformation of first generation immigrants. Ashima always wanted to return home. There is, however, a gradual and imperceptible shift in Ashima’s definition of “home”. For a long time, she held that her real home was in Calcutta and not in the USA. She is angry when her son Gogol refers to his Yale dorm as home. “Only three months and listen to you, she says,

telling him that after twenty years in America she cannot bring herself to refer to Pemberton Road as home” (108). She laments the lack of sense of belonging to their ancestral home in her children and feels as if she “has given birth to vagabonds” (167). Literally, a vagabond is a person who wanders from place to place without a settled home. Ashima considers her children as vagabond because they have no sense of attachment to a fixed home. While she blames her children for changing in the new environment, she does not realize that she herself has also changed. This becomes apparent to her when she decides to return to Calcutta after her husband’s death. As Lahiri describes this transformation: “She has learnt 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. She will return to Calcutta with an American passport” (276). When she sells the house in Pemberton Road where she has lived most of her married life, she recognizes painfully that she is leaving her real home forever. She now realizes that Calcutta is not her only home; the house she shared with her husband is equally dear to her. As Lahiri explains Ashima’s dilemma: “For thirty years she missed her life in India. Now she will miss her job at the library, the women with whom she had worked ... she will miss the country in which she had grown to know and love her husband” (179). Her long sojourn abroad had shaped unconsciously a new identity for her. Lahiri demonstrates that the dream of return to the homeland remains unchanged though the dreamer herself has changed.

The transformation is not confined to Ashima alone. The home Ashima cherished in her heart has also changed and has become alien to her. A home is not just a physical

structure on a piece of land; the sense of home is reinforced by the presence of dear and near ones. Over time, even the closest relatives may die. This became apparent to Ashoke and Ashima when they visited Calcutta, Every time they came home, they “steeled themselves to find fewer faces in the airport in Calcutta, to confront the deaths of relatives since the last time they were there” (140). The new generations who now live in the old home grew up in their absence and are unknown to them. As the narrator writes about Ashima, “She feels overwhelmed by the thought of the move she is about to make to the city that was once home and is now in its own way foreign” (278). The home that exists in Ashima’s mind has no correspondence to reality. This is what Salman Rushdie describes as an “imaginary homeland”

All her life Ashima believed that her Indian identity was supreme in her life. At the very end of her life, she realizes that India she cherished had vanished and her roots in the USA are deep. The duality in her identity is not unreal and cannot be wished away. She is at the same time an American and an Indian. At the last stage of her life, she floats between India and America – dividing her time between these two countries. As the narrator puts it, “True to the meaning of her name, she will be without borders, without a home of her own, resident everywhere and nowhere” (276). The experience of Ashima shows the rootlessness of first generation immigrants who are outsiders both in their original homeland as well as in adopted land.

While it is easy to explain the search for ethnic identity of first generation immigrants like Ashoke and Ashima, the roots of the identity crisis of second generation

immigrants are even more complex. The second generation assimilating- immigrant in *The Namesake* is represented by Gogol. He rebels against his ethnic identity by challenging the Bengali practice of naming family members. A person in Bengal has two names. There is a pet name or *daknam* which is called by friends, family, and other intimates. Every pet name has a corresponding *bhalonam* – the formal name which is used in public places by those who do not know him intimately. This practice serves a useful role by recognizing the multiple identities of the same person. The two names, says the narrator, are a “reminder that one is not all things to all people” (26). The same individual is viewed in a different way by various persons in one’s life.

The naming crisis of Gogol starts with his birth in an American hospital. The American system is totally inflexible about legal identity. The newborn in the USA is not released from hospital without a name. Gogol’s parents want to delay his naming because the family custom demands that a new child in the family be named by Ashima’s grandmother. The name suggested by grandmother does not come and she dies. The newborn is given the pet name “Gogol” by his father who believed that his life was saved in a train accident because unlike other passengers he was awake reading a story of his favorite Russian writer Gogol. Later, the father gave him the formal name Nikhil. This move was opposed by both Gogol and his teachers. The use of multiple names by the same person is unknown in US culture.

When Gogol learns about the lifelong unhappiness and mental instability of his Russian namesake, he changes his name to Nikhil – the formal name selected by his

father at the time of his admission to school. However, he is not comfortable with his double name. "At times he feels," writes Lahiri, "as if he is cast himself in a play, acting in the part of twins, indistinguishable to the naked eye yet fundamentally different" (105). Gogol resents the Bengali practice of two names which was imposed on him. In the American society where he was raised each person's identity is distinct and fixed. The Bengali practice of double names creates confusion about identity. Gogol had no doubt about his own identity. Living in America, he felt no attachment for his ancestral land in India. "He knows," writes Lahiri, "that *deshi* a generic term for countrymen, means Indian, knows that his parents and all their friends always refers to India simply as *desh*. But Gogol never thinks of India as *desh*, he thinks of it as Americans do, India" (118).

Consciously, Gogol always identified himself with America. He has no illusion or nostalgia about India. When his father was alive, Gogol was absorbed in the mainstream in American society and was indifferent to his father. As he matured and his father died, he started appreciating the sacrifices made by his parents for a better life for him and his sister. He develops nostalgia for his father and through his father's memory he feels the unconscious pull of Indian tradition. He ultimately reconciles himself to the fact that he is both Gogol and Nikhil – an American and Indian at the same time. He accepts his multiple identities.

In *The Namesake*, Lahiri made several important contributions to the understanding of South Asian diasporas in the USA. First, she skillfully portrays the

differences in the nature of identity crises of first and second generation immigrants. The identity crisis is overt in the case of first generation immigrants like Ashoke and Ashima while it is hidden in the case of second generation immigrants like Gogol. The identity crisis of second-generation immigrants is not obvious in their day to day behavior. It survives in their unconscious minds. Secondly, the most painful tragedy for the first generation immigrant is that they become strangers both in their adopted land and in their homeland. They are outsiders in their adopted land because they consciously resist assimilation. They become outsiders in their homeland because the homeland they long for is the homeland they have left behind. Over time, the homeland cherished in the memory of the immigrants vanishes. Immigrants themselves also change. The dream of homeland remains but the dreamers also change. Through the character of Ashima, Lahiri illustrates the premise of ‘Imaginary Homeland’ as propounded by Salman Rushdie. Finally, Lahiri’s description of the pains of immigration as “life-long pregnancy” is very apt. It suggests that the dichotomy of immigrants is real and there is no solution for this. What cannot be cured has to be endured.

The characters portrayed by Lahiri belong to middle class. The discriminations against women are not a major factor in their lives. Both Ashima and Moushumi in *The Namesake* are at home in the western society. This is not true about characters that are poor and involved in a life and death struggle in a strange land. The exploitation of women in South Asian diaspora is a major theme in Ali’s *Brick Lane* which will be analyzed in the next section.

Works Cited

Lahiri, Jhumpa. The Namesake. Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin Co., 2000.

---- A Conversation with Jhumpa Lahiri.25 Oct.2004.

http://www.houghtonmifflinbooks.com/readers_guide/lahiri.namesake.shtml.

----- "Jhumpa Lahiri" Wikipedia

CHAPTER FIVE

THE SEARCH FOR ETHNIC IDENTITY IN *BRICK LANE*

Monica Ali was born on October 20, 1967 in Dhaka. Unlike Mukherjee and Lahiri who have Bengali parents, Ali was the product of a mixed marriage. Her father Hatem Ali, a Bangladeshi student in the UK met her mother Joyce at a dance in north of England in the mid-sixties. When Hatem returned to Dhaka to a job as an Inspector of technical colleges, Joyce followed him and they were married against the wishes of his family who had already selected a bride for him. The Alis were content in Dhaka. However, they were forced to be evacuated to London during the War of Liberation in 1971. On their return to England, Alis had to struggle hard for their resettlement in England. Ultimately her father took a degree and started to teach in Open University, while her mother became a Counselor.

Technically, she is a first generation immigrant because she was born in Dhaka. In reality she was a second generation immigrant because she was settled in England from the age of three. She went to Bolton school and studied PPE (Philosophy, Politics and Economics) at Wardham College, Oxford. She married outside the ethnic

community. Her husband Simon is a management consultant and they live in South London with two children Felix and Shumi.

There are interesting similarities and differences among Mukherjee, Lahiri and Ali. All of them are assimilated in the mainstream of their adopted land. They married outside their ethnic community. All of them are well-educated. However, Ali is different from Mukherjee and Lahiri in three respects. First, Ali is by training a social scientist whereas Mukherjee and Lahiri studied literature and humanities. As a result, she is attracted to social issues like discrimination against women than to an emotional issue like ethnic identity. Secondly, as the daughter of an English mother and a virtual second generation immigrant, she had limited access to Bangladeshi society. As an outsider, she had to make a special effort to understand the roots of ethnic tradition in Bangladesh. As a result, her writings focus not only the trials and pains of immigration but also on the status of women in traditional societies. Finally, as a child of a colored father, Ali experienced uneasy relationship with her maternal grand parents. There were terrible rows between her parents and maternal grand parents. Ultimately, the children brought about reconciliation between the warring families. From childhood, Ali was very conscious that she was on the far side of two cultures. As she says, "But on the other hand you know that you are working to fit in, discarding certain things. It does give you a different feeling, a different perspective"

(<http://observer.guardian.co.uk/bookgroup/story/0,13699,991601,oo.html>).

Monica Ali has so far written two books *Brick Lane* (2003) and *Alentejo Blue* (2006). This section focuses exclusively on *Brick Lane* because the protagonists of this novel are immigrants. *Brick Lane* is named after a street at the heart of London's Bangladeshi community. The title of the novel refers to a Bangladeshi ghetto in London. There is considerable controversy on the realism of Ali's portrayal of the residents of Brick Lane. The Bangladeshi community in Brick Lane feels that it is a negative portrayal of the immigrants from Sylhet region. The novel makes them appear uneducated and unsophisticated. Their feelings are shared by Germaine Greer, the feminist writer who argues: "As British people know little and care less about the Bangladeshi people in their midst, their first appearance as characters in a English novel had the force of a defining caricature...Some of the Sylhetis of Brick lane did not recognize themselves. Bengali Muslims smart under an Islamic prejudice that they are irreligious and disorderly, the impure among the pure, and here was a proto-Bengali writer with a Muslim name, portraying them as all of that and more" (<http://books.gurdian.couk/bookgroup/story/0,,1832871,00.html>). Salman Rushdie was angered by these comments and described them as "philistine, sanctimonious and disgraceful". This controversy shows that life in South Asian diasporas is much more complex than stereotypes presented in Ali's novel. She represented faithfully the lives of many Bangladeshi immigrants. However, all the Bangladeshi immigrants are not alike and Ali's depiction of life in Brick Lane, though not incorrect, is incomplete.

As in Mukherjee's *Jasmine*, there are two distinct searches for identity. One relates to ethnic identity and the other concerns the discovery of real identity by a

woman. The search for ethnic identity in *Brick Lane* is different from that in Mukherjee's *Jasmine* and Lahiri's *The Namesake*. In *Jasmine*, the woman's identity is a more important issue than ethnic identity. However, transformation in an alien land is justified in *Jasmine* on the basis of the Hindu doctrine of reincarnation. In *Brick Lane*, religion is used not for justifying ethnic identity but for promoting fundamentalism. Unlike the protagonists of *Brick Lane* who are too poor to visit home occasionally, the characters in *The Namesake* are elites who visit India regularly. The preservation of ethnic identity is a more pressing issue in Lahiri's novel.

The search for ethnic identity in *Brick Lane* is confined to conversations of educated people like Chanu and Dr. Azad. They realize that the Bengali community in the U.K. suffers from "Going Home Syndrome" (24). This is diagnosed as a relic from peasant society in Bangladesh. For the peasants of Bangladesh who had migrated to U.K., "The pull of the land is stronger than the pull of blood." They have no attachment to the adopted land. When they save enough, they go back. In fact, such immigrants mentally do not leave their home though they physically live in England. "Their bodies are here but their hearts are back there" (24). So long as they exist here, they "recreate the villages" here.

In this novel, the issue of ethnic identity does not agitate either the poor who are preoccupied in the grim struggle for survival or the rich who are busy in enjoying the benefits of assimilation in the host country. This is a tragedy of the lower middle class, and of the educated immigrants who fail to adjust. This is a problem for Chanu, the

unsuccessful husband. This is not a problem for his half-educated wife Nazneen. Nor is it a problem for the affluent like Dr. Azad. As Chanu says, "To be an immigrant is to live out a tragedy" (91). The tragedy in his view arises from the clash between western values and their own. "I am not", says Chanu, "talking about the struggle to assimilate and the need to preserve one's identity and heritage. I am talking about the children who do not know what their identity is. I am talking about the feelings of alienation engendered by a society where racism is prevalent" (92). This view is contradicted by Mrs. Azad, whose husband is well-off: "Let me tell you a few simple facts. Fact you live in a western society. Fact: our children will act more and more like Westerners. Fact: that it is not a bad thing" (93). Ethnic identity is not a compelling issue in *Brick Lane*. It seems to excite misfits like Chanu who failed to make a happy home in the adopted land. In reality, it is used as a shield against the inferiority complex resulting from failure. Chanu, the ardent champion of ethnic identity, ultimately returns to Dhaka leaving behind his estranged wife and daughters.

The real protagonist of *Brick Lane* is Nazneen and not Chanu. Nazneen a sixteen year country girl from rural Bangladesh was married to the forty year old expatriate in the U.K. Nazneen had been the good daughter in her family. She acquiesced in the marriage her father had arranged for her after the death of her mother. In contrast, her younger sister Hasina is a rebel. She elopes in the hope of a love marriage and is disowned by the family. On the contrary, Nazneen is obedient and docile. Since her birth, she has been exposed to whims of fate. She is taught that "fighting against one's Fate can weaken the blood. Sometimes, or perhaps most times, it can be fatal" (10). The motto of her life in

rural Bangladesh can be summed up as follows: “What could not be changed must be borne. And since nothing could be changed, everything had to be borne” (11).

The arranged marriage with Chanu brings her from a poor village in Bangladesh to a council flat in Tower Hamlets – a Bangladeshi ghetto in London. As an unspoilt village girl from a Muslim-majority community in Bangladesh, Nazneen had a secluded existence within the confines of immediate relatives and neighbors. However, her life in London is worse than living behind a veil in a Bangladeshi village. Though there are fellow Bangladeshis in the neighborhood, her husband considers his neighbors as uneducated, illiterate and uncultured. He actively discourages Nazneen’s association with the neighbors who are below them. Her world is confined to “regular prayer regular housework and regular visits with Razia” (a friend). She remains calm and passive. “She told her mind to be still. She told her heart , do not beat with fear, do not beat with desire” She continues to act as the dutiful wife, cutting Chanu’s corns and trimming his nose hair.

She does not ask questions about the dominance of her husband. She always remembered her mother’s advice: “If God wanted us to ask questions, he would have made us men”. Despite the unquestioning obedience, there are ups and downs in their conjugal relations. The unspoken frustrations of Nazneen find expression in occasional silent protests. For a while, she puts hot chilies in her husband’s sandwiches, rolls up unwashed socks and hides them in his drawer and injures him while tending his feet. Her messages go unnoticed. Their relationship improves with the birth of the first child and

his subsequent hospitalization and death. Questions about her husband again crop up in her mind when he bullies their daughters. He forces his two daughters to commit to memory long passages of poetry and beats them when they fail. He tries to impose his own values and culture on daughters who are being raised in London, This leads to clash of cultures in the lives of their daughters. They have to behave differently at home than what they do with their friends and at school. The daughters rebel against the father and the mother sides with her daughters. Though she is totally isolated from the society around her, the fresh wind of western culture reaches her home through her daughters.

Imperceptibly, Nazneen undergoes transformation. As Ali puts it, "The village is leaving her". She starts making decisions. Dull routine decisions assume new meaning for her. When she begins to attend community meetings, unaccompanied by her husband, it is a giant step forward for her. Her decision to shave her legs is an act of emancipation for her. Finally, she plunges into an affair with Karim who is younger than her. Through gradual assertion of emancipation from her husband's subjugation, she finds new meaning in life. She refuses to return to Bangladesh with her husband. She realized that she is no longer the un-spoilt village girl from Bangladesh; she has changed beyond recognition. As Ali describes, "She had wanted to go. But now she did not know. The children would suffer; Chanu would face fresh agonies of disappointment; and she was not the girl from village any more. She was not the real thing." (320). She ultimately defended her own freedom and the freedom of her children. After her husband left her, she found that she was free to do whatever she liked. As her friend Razia reminds her, "This is England. You can do whatever you like" (413).

The main message of Ali is that women in traditional societies are more concerned with their own identity and survival than the preservation of their ethnic identity. Ali shows that poor women throughout the world are alike. This becomes apparent from a comparison of the lives of Nazneen and her sister Hasina. Unlike Nazneen, Hasina rebels against traditional values and elopes with her lover. Despite her efforts, she is powerless to control her fate. Doing whatever she has to do to stay alive, Hasina is subject to torture and abuse. Nazneen also had an unfulfilled life so long as she continued to be loyal to tradition. Rebellion brings emancipation for Nazneen but not for Hasina. Nazneen has more opportunities in an industrial country than Hasina in Bangladesh. Hasina, however, refused to surrender. As Chanu reports from Dhaka, "She seemed unbroken".

In short, Ali in *Brick Lane* shows that identity crisis of women immigrants is not caused by nostalgia for the home left behind but by their instinct for survival and search for human dignity. Ethnic identity is the luxury of educated misfits like Chanu. They are not even agitated by great religious issues. Religion agitates more the second generation than the first generation immigrants. Like the Hindus, the Muslims do not use religion to justify their transformation as rebirth. Religion is invoked to repudiate altogether the new identity in their adopted land.

By concentrating on an exploited Muslim woman immigrant, Ali's *Brick Lane* presents a new dimension of life in South Asian diaspora. The protagonists in the novels of Mukherjee and Lahiri are Hindus. Ali is one of the few novelists to write about

illiterate Muslim women migrants. None of these novelists alone could capture the depth and variety of life in South Asian diaspora. However, together they portray a realistic picture of the trials and tribulations of the immigrants from South Asia. The next section will present a comparison of similarities and contrasts of South Asian immigrants as presented in different contexts by three selected novelists.

Works Cited

Ali, Monica. Brick Lane. London and New York: Doubleday, 2003.

----- "Monica Ali" Wikipedia.

----- "Interview: Monica Ali" <http://>

Observer.guardian.co.uk?bookgroup/story/o,13699,991601,00.html

Whipple, Mary. "Monica Ali: Brick Lane".<http://mostlyfiction.com/world/ali.htm>

CHAPTER SIX

CONCLUSION

This study has analyzed the search for ethnic identity by Bharati Mukherjee, Jhumpa Lahiri, and Monica Ali - three women diasporic novelists of South Asian origin. The novels selected for this study were published between 1989 and 2003. There are similarities and contrasts in the backgrounds of these novelists. All three novelists in their personal lives are assimilating- immigrants and are married to western husbands. All of them are well educated in western universities. The contrasts are no less important. Mukherjee, born of Bengali parents, was a first generation immigrant. She was initially educated in India and has a deep understanding of Hinduism. Lahiri, though born of Bengali parents, was a second generation immigrant. The focus of her novel is on the contrast between first and second generation immigrants. Ali was born of mixed parentage. She was a virtual second generation immigrant. Both first and second generation immigrants figure in her novel. However, her focus is on the search of female identity by a first generation immigrant. There is difference in their training also. Mukherjee and Lahiri studied literature, while Ali is a social

scientist by training. As a result, Ali in her novel presented a more detailed description of ethnic ghetto than Mukherjee and Lahiri.

An analysis of the South Asian diasporas depicted by Mukherjee, Lahiri and Ali suggests that responses of immigrants to tensions of assimilation are personal and not communal. They demonstrate that ethnic identity is not imprinted forever in the consciousness of a group; each individual defines himself in the light of his own experience. Both Mukherjee and Ali suggest that the issue of ethnic identity is not the pressing issue in the lives of the poor who are engaged in a grim struggle of survival. For example, the real challenge before Jasmine is continued existence in a hostile environment and not the preservation of her Indianness. The priority of Nazneen in Ali's *Brick Lane* is not to return home or to preserve the ethnic identity of her daughters but to survive. In contrast, the champions of ethnic identity are affluent or well-educated. In *Jasmine*, Prof. Vadhera, who defends ethnic purity, belongs to the lower middle class. Ashoke and Ashima in *The Namesake* who want to preserve their ethnic identity are fairly affluent and can afford to visit India every year. Though Chanu in *Brick Lane* is not well-off, he is well-educated.

There are three types of motivations which impel the champions of ethnic purity. First, ethnic identity is often used as a shield to hide the inferiority of immigrants who espouse such a cause. In *Jasmine*, Prof. Vadhera has degraded his caste status by trading in human hair. He hides his deviations from caste rules by pretending at home that he is a professor. In *Brick Lane*, Chanu is a misfit who

has no secure source of livelihood. He tries to hide his poverty behind the shield of ethnic identity. However, Ashoke and Ashima in *The Namesake* are not poor. Their motivations for ethnic loyalty are different. Despite their affluence, they feel insecure in a strange land and they feel an obligation for the dear and near ones they have left behind.

Mukherjee, Lahiri and Ali show in their novels that though the protagonists feel that their ethnic identity is real, in reality it is an illusion. The home portrayed in Lahiri's *The Namesake* is in fact what Salman Rushdie describes as an "Imaginary Homeland". The image of permanent home imprinted in the minds of immigrants is the home they left. Over time, that home changes as the kith and kin that lived in that home die or move away. The immigrants themselves also change. At the end, Ashima in *The Namesake* realizes that the home she longs to return to in Calcutta no longer exists. In some cases, ethnic chauvinism is worse than a myth; it is a sham. Prof. Vadhera in *Jasmine* and Ali in *Brick Lane* want to hide their failures in life behind the façade of ethnic identity. The immigrants thus live in a make-believe world. The portrayal of ethnic identity by Mukherjee, Lahiri, and Ali supports Werner Sollors' hypothesis that ethnicity is not a natural but an invented tradition. As he argues, "Ethnicity here typically emerges not as a thing (let alone a static, permanent and 'pure' thing) but as a result of interactions. Ethnicity does not serve as the totalizing metaphor but simply as a perspective onto psychological, historical and cultural forces" (xix-xx). In a traditional society, every body is satisfied with their role and

nobody raises any question about his identity. The identity crisis of an immigrant stems from the encounter with a different and strange world. The ethnic identity of immigrants is not inherited; it is invented by each migrant in the light of his experience.

The influence of religion is very deep in traditional societies from which the immigrants come. However, religion does not figure at all as a major factor in Lahiri's *The Namesake*. The protagonists of this novel are from urban areas and from the affluent middle classes. They tend to be secular. Their main obligation is to the dear and near one left behind and not to religion. In contrast, the protagonist in Mukherjee's *Jasmine* is from a rural community. Jasmine is deeply influenced by Hinduism. However, in Jasmine's life, Hinduism is not a reactionary force. The doctrine of reincarnation is used to justify her own transformation in an alien land. The soul is immortal. In each rebirth, the identity of an individual may change but her soul remains unchanged. Thus changing of identity, according to Mukherjee, is comparable to rebirth (29). Ali's portrayal of religion in *Brick Lane* is, however, different from that of Mukherjee. In *Brick Lane*, religion is a not a potent force in the life of first generation immigrants who came from the rural areas of Bangladesh. It agitates the second generation immigrants like Karim who were born and raised in industrial societies. These second generation immigrants were galvanized by 9/11. However, through the character of Karim, who commits adultery in violation of religious instructions, Ali shows that so-called Islamic fundamentalism of second generation immigrants in *Brick Lane* is superficial and lacks conviction.

The exploitation of women is also one of the major limitations of traditional societies that send migrants to developed countries. For illiterate women from South Asia who migrate to the West, the self-awareness as a woman is more important than ethnic identity. It is not, therefore, surprising that identity of woman in a male-dominated society is a major theme in both *Jasmine* and *Brick Lane*.

An analysis of three novels on South Asian diasporas illustrates the momentous transformation in the lives of immigrants. The number of immigrants is continuously rising owing to globalization. This study has identified many of the issues relating to identity which are likely to arise in the near future.

Works Cited

Ali, Monica. Brick Lane. London and New York: Doubleday, 2003.

Lahiri, Jhumpa. The Namesake. Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin Co., 2003.

Mukherjee, Bharati. Jasmine. New York: Grove Press, 1989.

Sollors, Werner. The Invention of Ethnicity. New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989.

Bibliography

Alam, Fakrul. Bharati Mukherjee. New York: Twayne Publishers, 1996.

Ali, Monica. Brick Lane. London and New York: Doubleday, 2003.

_____"Monica Ali" Wikipedia.

_____"Interview: Monica Ali" [http. // Observer. guardian .co.uk? bookgroup / story/ o,13699, 991601,00.html](http://Observer.guardian.co.uk/bookgroup/story/0,13699,991601,00.html).

Appadurai, Arjun. "Disjuncture and Differences in the Global Cultural Economy." Theorizing Diaspora. Ed. Braziel, J.E. and Mannur, A. Oxford: Blackwell Publishing Ltd, 2003. 26- 48.

Boehmer, Elleke. Colonial& Postcolonial Literature. New York: Oxford University Press, 1995.

Braziel, J.E. and Mannur, A. "Nation, Migration, Globalization: Points of Contention in Diaspora Studies" Theorizing Diaspora. Ed. Braziel, J.E. and Mannur, A. Oxford: Blackwell Publishing Ltd, 2003.1-22.

Brians, Paul. Modern South Asian Literature In English. London: Greenwood Press, 2003

Erickson, Eric. "Identifying, Psychosocial". International Encyclopedia of Social Sciences. 1972.

Gleason, Philip. "Identifying Identity: A Semantic History." The Journal of American History. 69 (1983):910-31.

Gopinath, Gayatri. "Nostalgia, Desire, Diaspora: South Asian Sexualities in Motion."
Theorizing Diaspora. Ed. Braziel, J.E. and Mannur, A. Oxford: Blackwell Publishing Ltd,
2003. 261-279.

Kafka, Phillipa. On The Outside Looking In (dian) Indian Women Writers at Home
and Abroad. New York: PeterLang Publishing Inc. 2003.

Lahiri, Jhumpa. The Namesake. Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin Co. 2003.

_____. A Conversation with Jhumpa Lahiri. 25 Oct. 2004. [http://www. houghton mifflin
books. com/readers guides/lahiri namesake.shtml](http://www.houghtonmifflinbooks.com/readersguides/lahirinaamesake.shtml).

Mukherjee, Bharati. Jasmine. New York: Grove Press, 1989.

_____. "Two Ways to Belong in America." New York Times. 22 Sept .1996, sec.E.13.

_____. "Immigrants and Novels". Newsweek. 27 Sept .1997:58.

Rushdie, Salman. Imaginary Homeland. London :Granta Books, 1991.

Sollors, Werner. The Invention of Ethnicity. New York & Oxford :Oxford University
Press, 1989.

Terkenli, ThenoS. "Home As A Region" . Geographical Review. Vol.85 No.3 (July,
1995), 324-334.

Whipple, Mary. "Monica Ali: Brick Lane." [http:// mostly fiction.com/world/ali-htm](http://mostlyfiction.com/world/ali-htm).