Ana Gabriela Gomes da Cruz

SCATTERED SEEDS:

Motherhood in a Foreign Land in Jhumpa Lahiri's Works

Belo Horizonte

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Dissertação intitulada *Scattered seeds: motherhood in foreign land in Jhumpa Lahiri's works*, de autoria da Mestranda ANA GABRIELA GOMES DA CRUZ, apresentada ao Programa de Pós-Graduação em Estudos Literários da Faculdade de Letras da UFMG, como requisito parcial à obtenção do título de Mestre em Estudos Literários.

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Dedicated to the ones I love most:

My mother Marilene, my father Pedro,

my grandmother Vovó Teresa.

“For those who hope in the Lord

will renew their strength.”

Isaiah 40:31

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ABSTRACT

In this thesis I examine the relationship between motherhood and diaspora, by analyzing how the works of the Indian-American writer Jhumpa Lahiri depict the representation of Indian immigrant mothers in the USA. The main goal is to investigate Lahiri's novels *The Namesake* (2003) and *The Lowland* (2013), and her collections of short stories, *Interpreter of Maladies* (1999) and *Unaccustomed Earth* (2008), having as a theoretical reference notions of diaspora studies and contemporary feminist literary theory. In order to do so, I discuss the relations between motherhood, pregnancy and foreignness, as well as the role of the immigrant mother at home and in the public space. Particularly, it interests me the manner in which the women characters in these texts negotiate with their children who live in-between the Indian and the American cultures through cultural aspects such as religious holidays, clothing, culinary habits and language. I argue that mother-daughter bonds in Lahiri's fiction are different from the traditional mother-daughter relations, because they involve negotiations between different generations of immigrant women. Furthermore, I discuss how Lahiri's women characters deal with widowhood in a foreign land and how sisterhood is represented as a response to the diasporic solitude these women often feel. In the final part, some conclusions are presented, demonstrating that Lahiri's works can be seen both as feminist and diasporic texts, as some of the women characters in those fictional texts deal with motherhood whilst assimilating and negotiating with the host country's culture.

RESUMO

Nesta dissertação examino as relações entre maternidade e diáspora, analisando como as obras da escritora americana de origem Indiana Jhumpa Lahiri mostram as representações de mães imigrantes indianas nos EUA. A meta principal é investigar os romances de Lahiri, *The Namesake* (2003) e *The Lowland* (2013), e seus livros de contos, *Interpreter of Maladies* (1999) e *Unaccustomed Earth* (2008), tendo como referência teórica as noções dos estudos da diáspora e a teoria literária feminista contemporânea. Discuto as relações entre maternidade, gravidez e estrangeiridade, bem como o papel da mãe imigrante no lar e no espaço público. Particularmente, me interessa o modo como os sujeitos femininos nestes textos negociam com seus filhos em meio às culturas indianas e americanas através de aspectos culturais como feriados religiosos, vestuário, culinária e linguagem. Argumento que os laços entre mãe e filha na ficção de Lahiri são diferentes das tradicionais relações materno-filiais, porque elas envolvem negociações entre diferentes gerações de mulheres imigrantes. Além disso, discuto como as personagens femininas de Lahiri lidam com a viuvez numa terra estrangeira e como a irmandade é representada como uma resposta à solidão na diáspora que estas mulheres frequentemente sentem. Na parte final algumas conclusões são apresentadas, demonstrando como as obras de Lahiri podem ser vistas tanto como textos feministas quanto como textos diaspóricos, pois algumas das personagens femininas nestes textos ficcionais lidam com maternidade enquanto assimilam e negociam com a cultura do país anfitrião.

"Like pregnancy, being a foreigner,

Ashima believes, is something that elicits

the same curiosity from strangers,

the same combination of pity and respect."

(Jhumpa Lahiri, *The Namesake* 50)

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INTRODUCTION

"For the past eighteen months, ever since
she's arrived in Cambridge, nothing has felt
normal at all. It's not so much the pain,
which she knows, somehow, she will
survive. It's the consequence: motherhood
in a foreign land."

(Jhumpa Lahiri, *The Namesake* 5-6)

Jhumpa Lahiri was born in 1967 in London and raised in the USA. Her parents are diasporic Bengali immigrants and India was always part of her life through her repeated visits to Calcutta with her family, sometimes, for several months. Thus, she has a privileged view of both India and the USA as a writer who has constantly moved between two worlds, the East and the West. So far she has published four works: *Interpreter of Maladies*, a book of collected stories, winner of the Pulitzer Prize, published in 1999; her acclaimed novel *The Namesake*, published in 2003 and adapted into a film in 2006, by the Indian director Mira Nair; and the short-story collection *Unaccustomed Earth*, published in 2006. Her latest work is the novel *The Lowland*, published in 2013. In this thesis, I focus on the theme of motherhood and how it shapes the way the mother characters in Lahiri's works deal with their children and the cultural transformations when they move to the USA.

The Namesake portrays the struggles of an Indian couple who get married through an arranged marriage - a common tradition in India - and who move to the USA after the wedding. Ashoke Ganguli and Ashima's arranged marriage happens after a short visit he paid to her with his father. They are then introduced to each other. He is

"earning a Ph.D. in Boston, researching in the field of fiber optics" (9); she, in turn, can knit well and recite poems in English. The agreement is followed by an Indian wedding ceremony and they manage to stay together for many years, living in the USA. As Lee Mhatre points out, *The Namesake* explores "the adjustments of Bengali families who came to the United States and whose children, raised in the West, struggle to find their identity within the two differing cultures" (203). The adaptation to the American[1] culture and new customs is a challenge for the couple, especially for Ashima, who teaches her children about Indian[2] traditions while simultaneously negotiating with the host culture.

The story collections *Interpreter of Maladies* and *Unaccustomed Earth* also present mothers divided between cultures. Lahiri's mother characters usually raise their North American born children in a constant attempt to negotiate with their Indian traditions as they experience motherhood in a foreign land. Sandra Almeida points out that the diasporic experience for women and their feeling of not belonging "emerge symbolically from their spatial dislocation as migrant women – a displacement that mirrors their inability to fit in or to become part of a world from which they are alienated" (323). In fact, mothers in Lahiri's fiction are usually portrayed as displaced subjects not only for being immigrants and foreigners, but also for distancing themselves from their homeland and remaining outside it.

Although it may be argued that, in *The Lowland*, Lahiri's most recent novel, the protagonists are the two brothers and that the main theme of the novel is the Naxalite

[1] Despite the fact that the term "American" can be used to refer to other countries in the Americas and not only to the USA, in this thesis it will be used because it is the term Lahiri chooses in her writing to describe the nationality of her characters born in the USA.

[2] Although I acknowledge the variety and diversity of Indian culture, in this thesis I refer to the Bengali customs as Indian culture in general, following what Jhumpa Lahiri does in her fictional texts.

movement, I argue that Gauri is a relevant character as well. Gauri's choices lead her from "wife to widow, from sister-in-law to wife, from mother to childless woman" (240), and she "actively chose[s] to take these steps" (240). Gauri is portrayed as a woman who is not afraid of making choices, and whose way of dealing with motherhood differs from her Indian mother-in-law and her American-born daughter. Because it portrays three generations of mothers in India and in the USA, *The Lowland* can be considered a family novel.

The mother characters in Lahiri's fiction have to face motherhood in an unfamiliar land as if they were scattered seeds in foreign soil, hence the title "Scattered Seeds" for this thesis. In *Unaccustomed Earth* there is the recurrent image of gardens and seeds and the epigraph of the book taken from Nathaniel Hawthorne introduces the reader to the tone of the story: "Human nature will not flourish, any more than a potato, if it be planted and replanted, for too long a series of generations, in the same worn-out soil" (15). Lahiri's diasporic mothers struggle to keep their motherland traditions while simultaneously being nurtured by the foreign soil, negotiating with the host country's cultural habits and acting as mediators for their children between the host country and their homeland's traditions.

In order to choose which stories and novels to analyze, the criterion was that the texts chosen had to have women characters who are mothers, and who move from India to the USA, as it is the case of the novels *The Namesake* and *The Lowland*. Besides these novels, the stories "A Temporary Matter," "When Mr. Pirzada Came to Dine," "Mrs. Sen's" and "The Third and Final Continent," from *Interpreter of Maladies*, and "Unaccustomed Earth," "Hell-Heaven," "Only Goodness," "Nobody's Business" and "Hema and Kaushik," from *Unaccustomed Earth,* were also chosen for analysis as

these works highlight the role of the diasporic mother, or the memory of the mother, or the relations between diaspora and motherhood. The last three stories in *Unaccustomed Earth*, "Once in a Lifetime," "Year's End," and "Going Ashore" are interconnected and, in this thesis, they will be referred to as "Hema and Kaushik," which is the title given to the trio of stories.

I analyze the women characters as diasporic subjects as well as mothers in Jhumpa Lahiri's works, investigating how the connections between motherhood and diaspora are represented. Furthermore, I investigate how the notion of home is approached in the novel from the perspective of the mother characters. In addition, I analyze the importance of the mother characters and their role in the negotiations between the mother country and host country cultures, discussing the importance of the role of the mother and her associations with food and culinary habits. I also analyze the importance of the mother characters through the teaching of the Bengali language as well as the negotiations made by the second generation in the use of the Bengali and English languages. Finally, I discuss widowhood and sisterhood and I propose a comparison between the mother and daughter characters in order to understand how mother-daughter relations are represented in Jhumpa Lahiri's works.

The methodology of this research is bibliographical. Therefore, texts from the field of diaspora studies and feminist literary criticism were chosen as theoretical support as the focus of this research is on the representations of motherhood in a foreign land in Lahiri's works. I proposed a reading of the fictional texts in the light of these theories as they offer a proper theoretical framework for the analysis of Lahiri's fiction, allowing me to investigate the aspects of diaspora while simultaneously focusing on the role of the mothers in her work.

This thesis is organized into three chapters. In chapter one, "Scattering Diasporic Seeds: Motherhood and Home in Diaspora," I situate Lahiri's work in the field of diaspora studies. I discuss the concepts of home and diaspora, which are central to this research, in the first section, entitled "Searching for Home in Diaspora: Homeland and Host Land." In addition, chapter one highlights the relations between pregnancy, motherhood and foreignness in the section "Maternity and the Pregnant Foreign Mother." The last section of chapter one, "Mothers at Home and in Public Spaces," consists of an analysis of the notions of public and domestic spaces in Lahiri's fiction. When approaching the concepts of motherhood, pregnancy and mother-daughter relations, Adrienne Rich's *Of Woman Born*, Cristina Stevens' *Maternidade e Feminismo* and Elisabeth Badinter's *Um amor conquistado: O mito do amor materno* are relevant, because they discuss the connections between women's body and motherhood.

The second chapter, "The Mother as Negotiator and Mediator," is organized into three sections: "Negotiating Two Cultures: Habits, Holidays and Clothing," "The Mother's Food: A Taste of Nostalgia," and "Mother Tongue, Mother Country: Mothering in-between Languages." In this chapter, I discuss how the women characters negotiate and mediate between the American and Indian cultures. In order to enrich the discussion on the importance of culinary habits in Lahiri's works, scholars such as Anita Mannur, Ann Marie Alfonso-Forero, Asha Choubey and Laura Ahn Williams are important as they analyze how the cooking of Indian typical food is relevant to subjects in transit. The same is true in relation to the teaching and practice of Indian mother tongue and here Rosi Braidotti, Gayatri Spivak and Binita Mehta enable me to discuss and analyze the use of Bengali and English languages in the context of the immigrant

families portrayed in Lahiri's works. Moreover, it is suggested in this chapter that the mothers navigate between the two cultures through the way they deal with cultural aspects such as clothing, religious holidays, culinary habits and the use of language. In doing so, I try to show the importance of the space of home to the mothers in transit.

The relationships among women are the focus of the third chapter, "Bonds Between Women." Firstly, in "Daughters of America, Daughters of Mother India," I discuss how mother-daughter relations are different in Lahiri's fiction, because they involve the negotiations between different generations of immigrant women. Likewise, I discuss how the immigrant mothers deal with the fact that their daughters are Indian descendants born in the USA. Secondly, emphasis is given to how mother characters deal with widowhood in the host country in the section "Immigrant Widow Mothers." Finally, in "Solitude and Sisterhood" there is a discussion on how women characters find in sisterhood a way to overcome the solitude of being a foreigner. In order to analyze the connections between the mother characters' position as diasporic subjects and their role as mothers, Alfonso-Forero's "Immigrant Motherhood and Transnationality in Jhumpa Lahiri's Fiction," Julia Kristeva's *Strangers to Ourselves*, and Sandra Almeida's "In and Out the Global Village: Gender Relations in a Cosmopolitan World" enriches the discussion on motherhood and the conditions of being a foreigner. Moreover, Elizabeth Jackson's *Feminism and Contemporary Indian Women Writing* also helps in the discussion of the presence of the mother in the fictional novel and the theme of maternity in diasporic literature. These texts are important, because they provide the necessary theoretical support as far as feminist literary criticism is concerned.

The conclusion emphasizes the main discussions of the thesis, pointing out how

Lahiri's writing portrays mothers whose relationship to motherhood influences the way they deal with their motherland. Through a succinct analysis of the key topics, it shows how the mother characters are important for the preservation of the Indian culture abroad. Finally, I analyze the importance of such a reading of Lahiri's contemporary work, and how this research contributes to a better understanding of the role of mothers in the four works the author has written so far.

CHAPTER ONE

Scattering Diasporic Seeds:

Motherhood and Home in Diaspora

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"Throughout the experience, in spite of her
growing discomfort, she'd been astonished
by her body's ability to make life …
That it was happening so far from home…
had made it more miraculous still.
But she is terrified to raise a child
in a country where she is related to no one..."

(Lahiri, *The Namesake* 6)

Considering that Lahiri's work can be inserted in what is now referred to as diaspora studies, it is paramount to reflect on the concept of diaspora, which is central to this research. The main aim of this chapter is to analyze how the notion of diaspora is intrinsically related to the concept of home, and how, consequently, a reflection on the theme of home leads to the discussion of motherhood.

In Lahiri's fiction, the characters, mostly immigrants, usually connect the memory of their motherlands with their mothers. In addition, it often portrays motherhood being experienced through the body, which is not only female but also foreign. In this chapter, I discuss the notions of diaspora, motherhood and home, proposing how these concepts may be interconnected. In addition, I propose an analysis of the connections between pregnancy and foreignness. Then, I discuss the concepts of domestic and public spaces and their relation to home, motherhood and diaspora.

1.1 Searching for Home in Diaspora: Homeland and Host Land

"Oh, home is where your mother is."

(Suleri 147)

Historically, the term diaspora refers back to the Jewish diaspora, when the Jewish people had to leave their land and were scattered among other nations. It denotes "communities of people dislocated from their native homelands through migration, immigration or exile as a consequence of colonial expansion" (4), according to Jana Braziel and Anita Mannur, but etymologically it may also suggest "the (more positive) fertility of dispersion, dissemination, and the scattering of seeds" (4). They explain that, etymologically, the word diaspora derives from the greek term "*diasperien*, from *dia-*, 'across' and *–sperien* 'to sow or scatter seeds" (1). Thus, the scattering of seeds suggested by the meaning of the word may also refer to the dispersion of groups of people among other lands other than their motherlands. The concept has been "widely adopted in academic discourses on forced dispersal, immigration, displacement, and the establishment of reconfigured transnational communities" (Agnew "Diaspora and Memory" 19). Thus, diaspora, which used to be a historical term, can be now used in other dimensions, including the realm of literature, as it is the case in this research.

Avtar Brah suggests that the word diaspora "embodies a notion of a centre, a locus, a 'home' from where the dispersion occurs" (181) and she adds that the concept "embodies a subtext of 'home'" (190). As a consequence, it is easier to imagine the homeland as home and the host country as not home. However, what happens, in Susan Friedman's words, is that "the borders between homeland and hostland have become much more porous and fluid" ("The New Migration" 9). The diasporic fluidity of

borders and homes in Lahiri's fiction is the main aspect I investigate in this section, pointing to the relevance of not only analyzing the phenomenon of dispersion, but also the importance of memory and collectivity in the diasporic space between homeland and host land.

Instead of focusing on the exilic aspect of diaspora, that is, the loss of a homeland, Brah claims the importance of seeking the positive aspects of such diasporic journeys. She points out that the word diaspora often "invokes the imagery of traumas of separation and dislocation … but diasporas are also potentially the sites of hope and new beginnings" (193). Therefore, whereas the diasporic dispersion brings the exilic feelings of loss and mourning, the connections among the subjects bring hope of new beginnings. In this thesis, I analyze the roles of the different mothers portrayed in Lahiri's fiction in an attempt to verify whether and how the experience of motherhood in a foreign land brings a new beginning in their lives.

This research chooses as framework the concept of diaspora in order to analyze Lahiri's fictional texts. Indeed, it is possible to read her writing as belonging to a tradition of diasporic literature, especially because her works focus repeatedly on "the sense of displacement attached to the immigrant experience" (Brada-Williams 454). This immigrant experience is often observed in the way that mother characters have to deal with dislocation and displacement, when they leave their motherland India in order to accompany their husbands who are pursuing academic careers in the USA, as it happens with Gauri in *The Lowland* and Ashima in *The Namesake*, as it will be discussed further.

Not only does the phenomenon of diaspora refer to scattering and displacement, but it also refers to the attempt to reconnect to the homeland. There is a correlation

between the notion of diaspora and the idea of journeys and movements, because the immigrant usually occupies an in-between space, defined by Julia Kristeva as being a space like "a moving train, a plane in flight, the very transition that precludes stopping" (8). In this sense, immigrants are displaced subjects because they are in-between, in transit, in flux. Departures and arrivals are overwhelming moments to diasporic subjects because they convey the idea of movement and transit so typical of diaspora.

In Lahiri's first novel, *The Namesake*, for Gogol and his parents boarding a train or plane to go home symbolizes a return to their roots. During his life, his mother keeps track of all the "800 numbers of all the airlines they've flown back and forth to Calcutta" (159) in a diary. Gogol reflects on many trains and planes he and his family have taken and that his father almost died in a train accident, and concludes that "there was nothing, apart from his family, to draw him home, to make this train journey, again and again" (281-282). Thus, in the novel, there is the recurrent image of movement through trains and airplanes to reinforce the impact of changes, departures and arrivals on the characters.

Along with diaspora, home is a concept that pervades most of the narratives analyzed here. Lahiri's works are usually about how immigrants can construct their future in a land away from their motherlands, a home away from home in a new beginning of their lives. As Vijay Mishra argues, the homeland "is the *desh* (in Hindi) against which all the other lands are foreign" (2). Lahiri's immigrant mothers usually tend to create in the USA a small, imaginary India. In this sense, the characters keep a connection with the motherland when trying to create a sense of home in a foreign land. Home "is a mobile and unsettled concept" (Brydon 8) and the notion of home can be problematized in a diasporic context. Then, how to define home? Brah answers this

question affirming that home is a "mythic place of desire in the diasporic imagination" (192). She also claims that "in this sense it is a place of no return, even if it is possible to visit the geographical territory that is seen as the place of origin" (192). Hence, returns and origins are frequently problematized in the discussions of home. It is possible to argue that, more than a place in the map, home can be defined as a "place of belonging, involving a sense of family, intimacy" (Bennett 163). As a consequence, more than searching for a home to inhabit, diasporic subjects are looking for a place of belonging.

A good example of the fluidity of the concept of home is the Ganguli family, from *The Namesake* and Mrs. Sen from Lahiri's "Mrs. Sen's." For the Gangulis, there is the absence of a place to call home as they are always in movement, in an in-between place. Ashima is in the United States, but her heart is in her mother country, India. Lahiri contrasts the American way of life to which Ashima's husband Ashoke has adapted and to which the children learn to belong, with the Indian traditions and customs that Ashima insists on keeping and teaching to her offspring. Sometimes, she even feels that she has given birth to strangers, as her children feel that they belong to the USA because they were born there. Ashima takes the route to her roots and insistently thinks of India, her motherland, as home. Every time Ashima thinks of home, she thinks of India. She "pictures the black iron bars in the windows of her parents' flat" (42) and she thinks of her family left there, especially her female ancestors: her mother and her grandmother. Similarly, when Mrs. Sen from the short story "Mrs. Sen's" says home, she means India, not "the apartment where she sat chopping vegetables" (116). Actually, India keeps "cropping up as a setting, sometimes more figuratively, in the memory of [Lahiri's characters]" (Crampton 21). Ashima and

Mrs. Sen hold on to their memories of the past, having to satisfy themselves with annual visits, phone calls, and letters from her homeland. Ashima and Mrs. Sen refer to home as the place they left in India, where their mother is. In relation to Lahiri's characters it may be argued that, as Sara Suleri affirms, "home is where your mother is" (147). The fact that Ashima and Mrs. Sen connect home to the memory of their motherland and to their own mothers and grandmothers shows that the notion of home is intrinsically related to the presence of the mother. They do so in search for a home to inhabit.

Thus, it is possible to say that, if in diaspora the search is not for home, but, rather, for belonging, the immigrant characters such as Ashima and Mrs. Sen feel displaced in-between. In this condition of in-betweenness, they feel tempted to look back and search for a home in their previous homeland. However, there is no home to go back to. The return is an impossibility. For immigrants, there are at least two choices: to regret the past and construct imaginary homelands in their memories, or to assimilate and adapt to the host country in which they are now inserted. Therefore, for the ones who decide to adapt to the host country, forming communities of scattered subjects is often a response to their displaced condition, as it will be discussed in chapter three.

1.2 Maternity and the Pregnant Foreign Mother

"For being a foreigner, Ashima
is beginning to realize,
is a sort of lifelong pregnancy."
(Lahiri, *The Namesake* 49)

Motherhood is a recurrent theme in literature written by women, especially because, as Adrienne Rich points out, "we have all had mothers [and] the institution affects all women" (277). Being such a relevant experience for women, it is justifiable that motherhood be such a recurrent theme in literature as a way of voicing women's bodily experiences. In contemporary feminist studies, the concern with motherhood is not a recent one, and some feminists have expressed their concern with the institution of motherhood as being a construction and a performance. Elizabeth Jackson, for instance, asserts that "motherhood, like other relationships and institutions, is socially constructed rather than biologically inscribed" (87). Thus, being socially constructed, motherhood has to do also with the culture in which the mother is inserted.

Motherhood can be seen as a source of patriarchal oppression when women are valued only by their role as mothers. Feminists have different opinions about motherhood. Lucinda Peach affirms that, while some feminists argue that maternity is "central to women's oppression because it kept them tied to the home and economically dependent on men" (223), others have "generally viewed mothering and motherhood as more positive for women" (Peach 223). In the 1970s, motherhood was still a "relatively unexplored area for feminist theory" (Rich 15), probably because of its connection with patriarchal oppression, but, from the 1970s on, "feminist studies have analyzed more

intensely the question of motherhood in literature[3]" (Stevens "Maternidade e Feminismo" 46 *translation mine*). As far as Indian literature is concerned, Jackson states that motherhood is "such an important part of Indian culture, [that] it is likely to continue to be a prominent theme for Indian feminist writers" (110). In this research, it interests me most how Lahiri portrays motherhood in a foreign land because of the challenges embedded in both conditions of being a mother and a foreigner.

But why and how can the state of being a mother relate to the state of being a foreigner? Analyzing the terms "mother country," "motherland," "mother India," it is possible to conclude that they are all related to the idea of nationality as well as to the idea of motherhood. The separation from one's motherland is described by Mishra as if one were being "ripped apart from their mother's womb" (131). Following this line of thought, the mother country can be compared to the mother's womb.

According to Rich, the words for mother and "mud (earth, slime, the *matter* of which the planet is composed, the dust or clay of which "man" is built)" (108) are similar, being extremely close in many languages: "*mutter, madre, mater, material, moeder, modder*" (108). She explains that the name "Mother Earth" still " has currency, although, significantly, in our time, it has acquired a quaint, archaic, sentimental ring" (Rich 108) and that "in winter, vegetation retreats back into the earth-womb; and in death the human body, too, returns into that womb, to await rebirth" (108). Hence, the connections between motherland and the image of the mother; and the nationalism embodied in the word mother country are exemplified by the reference, for example, to India as Mother India and the planet as Mother Earth.

In *The Namesake*, Ashima's firstborn son is named Gogol after his namesake,

[3] "estudos feministas têm analisado mais intensamente a questão da maternidade na literatura" (Stevens "Maternidade e Feminismo" 46).

the Russian writer Nikholai Gogol. When Gogol is born, Ashima feels sorry for him and thinks that "she has never known of a person entering the world so alone, so deprived" (25) because he is born away from his relatives. Ashima thinks that her "body's ability to make life, exactly as her mother and grandmother and all her great-grandmothers had done" (6) is more overwhelming than pregnancy itself because she is "so far from home, unmonitored and unobserved by those she loved" (6). Nevertheless, when she is having childbirth contractions in the hospital she is aware that she will survive the pangs but what most scares her is their consequence: having to raise her child in a land where she is a foreigner. In the narrative there is a detailed description of the experience of childbirth:

> Ashima's initial glimpse, before the cord is clipped and they carry him away, is of a creature coated with a thick white paste, and streaks of blood, her blood, on the shoulders, feet and head. A needle placed in the small of her back has removed all sensation from her waist to her knees, and given her a blistering headache in the final stages of the delivery. When it is all over she begins to shiver profoundly, as if beset with an acute fever. For half an hour she trembles, in a daze, covered by a blanket, her insides empty, her outside still misshapen. She is unable to speak, her throat is parched. She is told to sit on a toilet, to squirt warm water from a bottle between her legs. Eventually she is sponged clean, put into a new gown, wheeled into yet another room. (22)

By reading this description, it is possible to observe the voicing of one of most painful experiences of women: the pangs of childbirth. By portraying the reality of childbirth, the descriptions of the cravings of pregnancy and the discomfort of the pregnant foreign

woman's body changes, the experience of motherhood once romanticized in literature is demystified. The addition of childbirth descriptions to the narratives reveals the concern of the narrator in voicing immigrant women's experience of motherhood.

In "Only Goodness," Sudha remembers that her mother's childbirth pangs were so intense that she was afraid her mother was dying. The moment when her mother went into labor to give birth to her brother is the "first sustained memory of her life" (133). Sudha remembers being terrified to see her mother "moaning with her forehead pressed against a wall" (134), shouting for her to go away because she did not want to be seen in that condition. Therefore, Sudha connects motherhood to her mother's suffering when her brother is born. In "Only Goodness" and in *The Namesake*, the mothers' experiences of childbirth are aggravated by the fact that they are foreigners. Their mothers are in another continent, and their traditional Indian husbands are only surrogate presences for the absence of their maternal ancestors.

Ashima thinks of the cold Cambridge city to which she has moved with her husband and concludes that she does not want to raise her son in that country. She 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). Eventually, Ashima says to her husband: "'hurry up and finish your degree.' And then, impulsively, admitting it for the first time: 'I'm saying I don't want to raise Gogol alone in this country. It's not right. I want to go back'" (33). Besides feeling homesick, Ashima feels dislocated and displaced, as if she did not belong anywhere. She faces the challenge of being a mother far away from her own mother. In relation to Lahiri's women characters, Daniela Silva affirms that once in America, Lahiri's women have to accept life away from "their families and other Indian women, who previously represented their extended family,

having to put up with different cultural habits in terms of childcare, household chores and food" (50-51). Thus, Ashima is portrayed as a displaced subject not only for being an immigrant and foreigner, but also for distancing herself from her family and her homeland.

In an episode when Ashima goes for the first time to the supermarket without her husband, she is "repeatedly stopped on the street, and in the aisles of the supermarket, by perfect strangers, all Americans, suddenly taking notice of her, smiling, congratulating her for what she's done" (34). Here she experiences the curiosity from strangers she had already felt as a foreigner but now she feels it in her new condition as a mother. Indeed, foreigners are usually approached by strangers who are curious to know about their origins and the reasons why they have left their homelands. In the same way, mothers are usually complimented on their babies by strangers. There is a close relation between the body of the pregnant mother and the body of the foreign mother, for both conditions make "one vulnerable and visible in a disturbing way" (Almeida 52). As Ashima is a new mother in a foreign land, her condition gives her the two positions at the same time: the condition of being a mother and the condition of being a foreigner. In the states of being a foreigner and being pregnant, it is impossible to return to what one was before, as the narrator states:

> For being a foreigner, Ashima is beginning to realize, 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, Ashima believes, is something that elicits

> the same curiosity from strangers, the same combination of pity and respect. (49-50)

A pregnant woman often feels unsettled and displaced, as she is pregnant, but not exactly a mother yet. She is unable to deny her condition of pregnancy as she expects the time of delivery. During their pregnancy mothers carry in their wombs another human being who is somehow part of their bodies, being nurtured by the mother's nutrients. It is a state of transit because gestation takes only nine months – a time during which women suffer overwhelming transformations in their bodies.

Stevens discusses the connections of pregnancy to foreignness, questioning what it means for a woman "to contain in herself the body of other[4]" ("O corpo da mãe" 90 *translation mine*). She also points out that "the word m-other curiously shows this characteristic of the mother as the first 'other' in the identity formation of a child[5]" (Stevens "Maternidade e feminismo" 42 *translation mine*). Thus, the word "mother" encompasses the word "other" which brings to discussion the fact that mothers carry an "other" in their wombs during pregnancy. Rich points out that "in certain situations the child in one's body can only feel like a foreign body introduced from without: an alien" (64) because the child in the womb can be defined by the mother "neither as me or as not-me" (Rich 64). Similarly, immigrants are neither here, nor there. During pregnancy, the interior of the baby is still in formation, in a process of becoming, in close interaction with the mother's body. In the same way, a foreigner may experience the displacement of being the other in transit, in-between worlds.

Here, motherhood connects the woman's experience to the diasporic experience

[4] "conter nela o corpo de outro" (Stevens 90 "O corpo da mãe").

[5] "a palavra *m-other* curiosamente evidencia essa característica da mãe como primeiro 'outro' na formação do 'eu' da criança" (Stevens 42 "Maternidade e feminismo").

because the condition of pregnancy is compared to the condition of foreignness. In fact, the process of giving birth and the state of being a foreigner both imply some kind of solitude. One is born alone and in that moment is deprived of the mother's womb, and by the same token, once away from the homeland, foreigners can also experience the feeling of displacement, loneliness and homesickness.

Another example of the effects of pregnancy observed in relation to Lahiri's women characters is Ruma from the story "Unaccustomed Earth," who is overwhelmed by the experience of pregnancy, even though her mother keeps her company in the hospital when she has her first child. For Ruma, motherhood connects her to her mother, who tells her the baby "is made from [her] meat and bone" (46), a commentary which causes Ruma to "acknowledge the supernatural in everyday life" (46). Ruma marvels at the fact that her son is breathing and that "all his organs were in their proper places, amazed that blood flowed quietly and effectively through his small, sturdy limbs" (46). She wonders at the power of motherhood, of being able to conceive another human being inside her womb. Furthermore, motherhood connects her to her own mother.

A way of demystifying the romanticized ideal motherhood is by portraying mothers who, in Elisabeth Badinter's words, "do not have an irresistible impulsion to occupy themselves with their child[6]" (10 *translation mine*). In "Interpreter of Maladies" Mrs. Das and her husband "behaved like an older brother and sister, not parents" (49), and she treats her daughter as if she were her sister, not a mother. In the novel *The Lowland*, the relationship of Gauri with the baby in her womb is not a positive one because Gauri discovers she is pregnant after her husband's tragic death. She becomes a

[6] "não tem uma pulsão irresistível a se ocupar do filho" (10).

young widow and she compares her baby to the ghost of her dead husband. She feels during her pregnancy as if she "contained a ghost, as Udayan was. The child was a version of him, in that it was both present and absent. Both within her and remote" (124). She compares her baby to a ghost because her presence is a reminder of her lost husband.

Nevertheless, Gauri is relieved to marry again, this time to Subhash, her brother-in-law, and to start her life in the USA. She considers that it "was the place where she could put things behind her. Where her child would be born, ignorant and safe" (125). Thus, the arrival of her child in the USA and not in her in-laws' house in India, "providing company but also leaving her be," (142) represents a new beginning for Gauri. Motherhood at first is a burden to her because it comes after her early widowhood, but eventually it becomes a way of redemption, a new life in the foreign land, a way of putting the past behind. However, even after her baby is born, she cannot cherish her daughter's childhood to the point in which Bela, the daughter, feels she is "unable to bring pleasure to her mother" (268) and that "around Bela her mother had never pretended. She had transmitted an unhappiness that was steady" (268). Therefore, when Gauri leaves her daughter to go to California, Subhash sees his mother's prophecy being fulfilled, in the sense that she considered Gauri "too withdrawn, too aloof to be a mother" (114). Therefore, whereas Ashima and Ruma are examples of mothers who meet patriarchal society's expectations and play the role of nurturing mothers to their children, Mrs. Das in "Interpreter of Maladies" and Gauri in *The Lowland* are characters who break paradigms as they do not fulfill the expected idealized view of the traditional Indian mother.

For Bela, Gauri's daughter, pregnancy is an experience that inspires awe. Even

though she feels "fused with a being she could not see or know" (268), she is proud of the fact she is going to be a mother, being possible to sense the "pride, the ease, with which she carried the child" (265). She acknowledges her baby as the "unknown person maturing inside her [who] was the only being with whom Bela felt any connection…the only part of her that felt faithful, familiar" (268). Hence, motherhood is a positive experience for Bela, even though she is a single mother and she has suffered the trauma of being abandoned by her mother when she was a teenager.

Although the baby in their wombs can be seen as an "other," a stranger, in some cases as observed in *The Lowland*, it can also provide company for the moments of solitude as those mothers, Bela and Ashima, feel in *The Lowland* and in *The Namesake*. Bela chooses to be a single mother and her daughter Meghna becomes a company for her. Similarly, motherhood provides Ashima with a way to occupy herself, "the days that had once dragged rush all too quickly toward evening – those same hours are consumed with Gogol, pacing the three rooms of the apartment with him in her arms" (35). When Ashima "wonders if she is the only Indian person in the hospital [a] gentle twitch from the baby reminds her that she is, technically speaking, not alone" (3-4). Becoming a mother is for Ashima a way of dealing with her new situation as a foreign. In fact, she is overwhelmed "by caring for her child without the help of her extended family" (Simon 230) but she soon discovers that motherhood "distracts her from loneliness and provides a way of expanding her world" (Simon 230) and her son becomes a company to her in her often solitary life in the USA.

As I have been arguing, the condition of diasporic subjects somehow shapes the way Lahiri's mothers deal with motherhood, as it happens with Gauri and Ashima, although they have different backgrounds. Ashima, for instance, comes from a

traditional Indian family, while Gauri faces familiar problems since childhood, being an orphan who lives with her brother and other relatives. Motherhood enables Ashima to adjust to her condition of foreigner, but Ashima and Gauri present different approaches to maternity in a foreign land, as Gauri's problems with motherhood are not entirely related to a diasporic condition. Some of Lahiri's mothers are glad to be mothers, despite the challenges of the situation, as it happens with Ashima and Bela. Others see motherhood as a burden, as portrayed in *The Lowland* and "Interpreter of Maladies." Nevertheless, it possible to conclude that by being mothers and foreigners, Lahiri's characters experience motherhood in a challenging way.

1.3 Mothers at Home and in Public Spaces

> "Go ahead and start," his mother says, still hovering between the dining room and the kitchen."
>
> (Lahiri, *The Namesake* 148)

There is an intrinsic correlation between the idea of motherhood and home. Motherhood calls to mind "the home, and we like to believe that the home is a private place" (Rich 275). Doreen Massey presents similar arguments explaining that "the construction of 'home' as a woman's place has, moreover, carried through into those views of place itself as a source of stability, reliability and authenticity" (180), implying that the idea of home is traditionally connected to the space where the mother is found. In addition, it is also important to analyze how the culture of the mother's homeland is preserved in the space of home and how women's role can be relevant in the

preservation of culture. In this section, I discuss the mother characters in relation to their interaction with both the domestic and the public spaces, investigating how Lahiri shows mother characters who negotiate in the domestic realm of the home but also occupy public spaces.

If we were to define the term culture, we would conclude that it goes beyond the customs and traditions of a people. Jamaica Kincaid affirms that culture is "in some places, [the] way they play drums; in other places, it's the way you behave out in public; and in still other places, it's just the way a person cooks food" (49). Defining the meaning of culture is not an easy task, as Arjun Appadurai points out: "some anthropologists have worried that the meanings given to culture have been far too diverse for a technical term; others have made a virtue of that diversity" (50). Therefore, the immigrants' attempt to remain connected to their homelands through their traditions and practices is a nationalist response, a way of affirming their affiliations to the mother country they come from. For this reason cultural traditions deserve a special focus in this research as they are a recurrent theme in Lahiri's fiction.

Indian mothers when abroad, usually contribute to the changing of both cultures, from the USA and from India, as they blend both cultures and often recreate other cultural traditions. About this blending of cultures, Daniel and Jonathan Boyarin point out that cultures are not preserved "by being protected from 'mixing' but probably can only continue to exist as a product of such mixing" (108). Thus, the mixing and blending of cultures in diasporic conditions is not a threat to the preservation of one's culture because, as Pierrette Hondagneu-Sotelo affirms, the "new emergent cultures and hybrid ways of life resemble neither those in the place of origin nor the place of destination" (318). Instead, by inhabiting an in-between space, immigrants are able to

promote what Homi Bhabha terms “innovative sites of collaboration and contestation” (1), sites which are negotiated and adapted. In order to resist assimilation into the host country, immigrants make use of their memories in order “to revive, recreate, and invent their artistic, linguistic, economic, religious, cultural and political practices and productions” (Hua 193). There is adaptation and negotiation involved in the maintenance of one’s culture abroad. Susan Friedman also suggests that these immigrants “resist assimilation but also adapt to their new environs” (“The New Migration” 20), which implies that diasporic subjects maintain their homeland traditions but they also assimilate the customs from the host country.

Immigrants usually live in “their own frozen sense of their cultural identity, behaving as if they were still in their countries of origin” (Braidotti 60). This fact is explained by Binita Mehta when she states that “the Indians continue to preserve their way of life, their religion and food habits” (189). However, the diasporic Indian writer, Salman Rushdie questions how “can culture be preserved without becoming ossified?” (18). Indeed, culture is a wide concept, and in Boyarin’s words, “cultures, as well as identities, are constantly being remade” (108). Therefore, it is not my intention to delineate its boundaries in this discussion or to affirm that the mother characters manage to ossify the Indian culture abroad when attempting to preserve it. Instead, it interests me that the negotiation between the USA and the Indian cultures is frequently depicted in Lahiri’s works as mediated by the diasporic mothers.

By mediating in-between cultures, the mother characters analyzed seem not to impose the Indian traditions on their children who were born in the USA, but rather, they negotiate with the culture in which their children grow up. According to Mehta, the practice of rituals “may help the older generation maintain a sense of identity, but the

rites are perhaps meaningless to the younger generation" (197). Therefore, mothers also negotiate and convert the traditions in order to keep up with their children's choices. Instead of merely transmitting their homeland's culture to their children, in what Lisa Lowe calls an "unmediated vertical transmission of culture from one generation to another," (136) immigrant mothers also become learners of the host country's culture through their children. In this sense, there is a confluence and a sharing of traditions and cultures.

In the crossing of boundaries promoted by diaspora, the host country's culture influences the diasporic subject in what Susan Friedman calls the "syncretist borderlands of cultural exchange, intermingling, and mutual influence" (*Mappings* 135). Actually what happens in diasporic conditions is a blurring of the boundaries in-between cultures, the frontiers between one culture and another are not easily defined. Agnew notes that immigration requires "the crossing of frontiers – physical and metaphorical, visible and invisible, known and unknown – and the line that is drawn is fluid and unstable" ("Language Matters" 44). In this mutual influence, a relevant aspect of the culture of a country is its fluidity, that is, the ability a national culture has to change and be transformed and still represent a country.

The preservation of the motherland culture seems often to be a woman's role in diasporic movements. According to Elleke Boehmer women are "widely regarded as icons of national values, or idealized custodians of tradition" (225). In addition, Sneja Gunew presents similar arguments when affirming that women are "often construed as the bearers of tradition, more emphatically so when in transition" (33). Rosi Braidotti also affirms that "women usually play the role of the loyal keepers of the original home culture" (60) and it is possible to affirm that the decision to remain attached to the

motherland's culture may be a consequence of the immigrant's mother displacement in the host country. This seems to be especially the case of Ashima in *The Namesake* who reproduces her homeland traditions in an attempt to remain faithful to their matriarchal heritage, as I will further discuss. By preserving the homeland traditions, Ashima, the foreign Indian mother takes advantage of her power as matriarch in order to teach the Indian culture to her children.

Women are portrayed as important agents in the realm of contemporary transnationality. Actually, as Agnew defends, immigrant women possess "ability to recreate a culture in diverse locations" ("Introduction" 4). It is important to observe that the role of the Indian mother when abroad, abreast of two cultures, is intensified by the risk that the customs of the motherland will be forgotten throughout the passing of years and the geographical distance. In a way, the mother characters in Lahiri's fiction contribute to the negotiation and mediation of the Indian culture when living abroad in the USA. They do so when maintaining their customs and teaching them to their children, preserving the culture they inherited in the private space of home.

It is important to discuss the notion of spaces which are traditionally organized as private and public. Jody Bernand explains that the private sphere "was inseparable from the rise of a specific construction of femininity, while public life and mobility have been largely gendered as masculine" (257). Thus, the private space of home, and especially of the kitchen, has acquired, in Tony Bennett's words, "marked gendered characteristics as a private, largely feminized domestic sphere separated off from the male-dominated worlds of work and public life" (163). In this sense, the house is traditionally a private space dominated and presided by women as opposed to the public space, which is usually connected to men's power and patriarchal domination.

Therefore, gender and space are interrelated concepts. Mothers are most remembered at the space of the kitchen, which can be explained by the fact that the home is traditionally a private space, marked by gender. Alison Blunt and Gillian Rose point out that this division between private and public can be observed in physical spaces such as the rooms of an apartment as usually, "a woman can speak with authority and be heard more easily in the kitchen because under the patriarchal division of labor this is the space in which she has the greatest authority" (2). However, "contestation and renegotiation of the meaning of spaces is also always possible" (Blunt & Rose 3). In this sense, the kitchen can be an ambivalent space: it can promote segregation if the mother is confined to the kitchen. On the other hand, the kitchen may be a place where women feel empowered and where they feel comfortable.

In traditional India, matriarchs are very respected and valued in Indian traditions and therefore, the domestic sphere becomes the realm governed by women. Women are "viewed within the domesticity and the marital framework that conditioned and governed all her behavior, attitudes, emotions and relationship with the members of a given family" (Das 323). They work and function within the domestic space, playing the expected roles of wife and daughter. After marrying, women traditionally move to their in-laws' house forming an extended family where they cook and do their house chores under the supervision of a usually demanding mother-in-law. Indian women are traditionally valued by their roles as mothers and wives, being the mother image in Indian literature, a representative of "the ideals and concepts sanctified by time, enforced by the society" (Das 333). However, according to Kumar Das, the Gandhian movement enlarged the social space for women, "and generated forces to demolish the wall dividing the public and the domestic world" (343). Women can finally go beyond

the domestic walls and, as portrayed by some of women mother characters in Lahiri's works that I will soon analyze, they could travel abroad and establish their houses with their husbands, away from their in-laws' houses. This movement modifies the spatial structure in relation to gender relations.

By moving to the USA, the Indian women are somehow free from the mother-in-law supervision. This happens because instead of moving to their in-laws' house when they marry, they finally establish their own house together with their husbands, governing their houses on their own. Lahiri's most recent novel, *The Lowland,* gives us a good example of the structure of the extended family in India. After marrying a woman of his own choice, instead of allowing his parents to choose a wife for him, Udayan takes his wife to live with his parents. In this case, living in her in-laws house and becoming an extended family with them is something negative for Gauri because her in-laws segregate her, ignoring her presence in the house, rarely speaking to her and requiring that she has her meals in the kitchen. There they occupy a room by themselves but the wife is required to help her mother-in-law in the house chores before "bathing and packing her books and taking the tram back to North Calcutta, to visit the library, to attend lectures" (290). It is only after helping in the cooking and cleaning of the house that Gauri, the daughter in-law, can leave the house to go to the university. Gauri navigates between the public and the domestic spaces because during the day she is at home doing the house chores and at night she goes to the university.

When Gauri's husband dies, Subhash, her brother-in-law, asks her to marry him and to move to the USA afterwards. Despite her mother-in-law's disapproval, who does not bless the new union and is outraged that a girl she did not like, "did not want in her family, was going to become her daughter-in-law twice over" (186), Gauri moves to

Boston with her brother-in-law, now husband. In the USA Gauri is free from her mother-in-law coldness toward her and is able to construct a new life in the foreign land. This new life includes returning to the university in order to pursue an academic career. Gauri goes to the university and furthers her education in the academy, while her husband looks after their daughter when he is not working on his research. Besides, Subhash becomes a less traditional husband who occupies the space of the kitchen and prepares his own food instead of waiting to be served, like a typical Indian husband. Therefore their move to the USA promotes a change not only of geographical space but of gender spaces as well.

The space of the kitchen and its associations with the presence of the mother is also relevant in the analysis of Lahiri's works, because the kitchen is often connected to the image of the immigrant mother. In "Hema and Kaushik" the space of the kitchen is the place where the mother is most remembered. Although during the period Kaushik lives in that house with his parents his mother is sick and cannot cook, he affirms that the space of the kitchen "still retained her presence more than any other part of the house" (263). Besides, Kaushik also remembers his mother in their kitchen in Bombay, "complaining cheerfully in the kitchen, telling [the cook] Zareen to try another batch, that she was frying them before the oil was hot enough" (261). It seems that Chitra, Kaushik's stepmother, finds in the kitchen a place of refuge, as she is always leaving the dining room and going back to the kitchen. She gets up and goes to the kitchen, takes the plates there, comes back to the dinner room but she soon returns abruptly, following Kaushik whenever he goes into the kitchen. For Chitra, the kitchen is a place where she belongs and feels secure, always returning there. She keeps herself to the traditional configuration of gender spaces she has learned in her upbringing in India,

despite the fact she now lives in the USA. Chitra, Kaushik's stepmother, differs from his mother in the sense that she cooks the Indian meals herself, while Kaushik's mother would have a cook prepare the meals for her and her family. Therefore, Chitra remains in the kitchen because, as a typical Indian mother, she finds that there is the place where she can govern and preserve her cultural background.

At first the migrant mothers feel comfortable only in the kitchen as happens with Chitra in "Hema & Kaushik," but slowly they occupy other rooms, as it happens with Ashima in *The Namesake.* As a traditional Indian wife it seems that Ashima does not feel comfortable outside the house alone, in the public space, as if the streets where places where she should not be on her own. Before going out with her newborn baby she calls her husband at university but he does not answer the phone. On a depressing afternoon, Ashima leaves the comfort of her domestic space and decides to go to the supermarket to buy a bag of white long-grain rice. This episode shows that after living in the USA for a while, Ashima starts to become accustomed to the foreign city and feels secure enough to go outside with her baby boy without her husband's company. It is only when leaving the domestic sphere that Ashima is able to assert her subjectivity as a foreign mother in a foreign land. Eventually, as it happens with Gauri in *The Lowland* and Ashima in *The Namesake*, the mothers start occupying public spaces such as university libraries and the campus where their husbands teach. It may be argued that it is through motherhood that the immigrant women start to have connections with the culture around them.

In *The Namesake*, Lahiri connects Ashima with her kitchen from the first chapter. Ashima cooks for her husband as a traditional Indian housewife and she gets to know him in the first years of their arranged marriage through his eating preferences:

"she has learned that her husband likes his food on the salty side, that his favorite thing about lamb curry is the potatoes, and that he likes to finish his dinner with a small final helping of rice and dal" (10). Thus, Ashima, an obedient daughter who marries the man of her parents' choice, gets to know her husband by faithfully cooking for him. The space of the kitchen is also the place where the mother is most remembered by her children, as she is constantly "hovering between the dining room and the kitchen" (148), finishing up and serving the meals. It seems that Ashima finds in the kitchen a place of refuge, as she is always leaving the dining room and going back to the kitchen. Ashima "wakes up at six, pulling Gogol out of the crib for his first feeding … between eleven and one, while Gogol sleeps, she gets dinner out of the way, a habit she will maintain for decades to come" (35). Hence, the preparation of the meals is represented as a continuation of her maternal care towards her children.

If in her first pregnancy Ashima prepares Indian food in an attempt to fulfill her diasporic void, conversely, in her second pregnancy she becomes careless about cooking and eating. When Gogol is five years old and Ashima's is expecting Sonia, her second child, she does not feel like cooking as before. This second pregnancy, unlike the first one, consumes Ashima's energy. Not only does she feels sick at the smell of food in this second pregnancy, but she also seems to be better adapted to her life in the USA, because she allows her husband to prepare food for her and her child when she finds no energy to do so. Ashima forces herself to eat "a slice of toast, only because Ashoke makes it for her and watches her while she chews it in bed" (53-54) and she staggers "out to the kitchen at lunchtime, to prepare a peanut butter and jelly sandwich for Gogol" (54). His mother's presence in the kitchen, presiding over the stove, becomes for Gogol a token of her maternal love towards him; however, during her

pregnancy her cooking and eating habits are strongly affected. Gogol misses his mother's presence in the kitchen and he finds it odd "to see his father presiding in the kitchen, standing in his mother's place at the stove" (54). Besides, he does not feel like eating without his mother at the table because although "his father remembers to mix up the rice and curry for Gogol beforehand" (55), he doesn't "bother to shape it into individual balls the way his mother does, lining them around his plate like the numbers on a clockface" (55). It can be noticed that cultural influences already have an interference with Ashima's life because she becomes absent in her tasks of preparing food for her child, delegating the task to her husband. There is a temporary change of gender roles in this episode, as Ashoke assumes the kitchen. However, he feels awkward in the space of the kitchen, as a typical Indian husband. This episode is only part of the negotiations of the couple with the host country because as soon as Sonia is born Ashima returns to the space of the kitchen as before.

Another occasion in which Ashima leaves the kitchen is when they travel to Calcutta. There, "for eight months [she] does not set foot in a kitchen" (83) because Indian food is available everywhere and she does not have to cook it for her husband and her children. However, when they are back to the house in the USA, she "enters the kitchen and prepares their meals once again" (87). Again the space of the kitchen is the gendered space of negotiation and mediation for the immigrant mother.

It is noticeable how the concepts of diaspora, home and motherhood are interconnected in Lahiri's fiction. While she presents mother characters such as Chitra and Ashima who are diasporic subjects in search of a home, and who connect the idea of home with their motherland, her works also portray mothers who have different approaches to the host country, as it happens with Gauri and Kaushik's mother. In the

next chapter I propose an analysis of how the immigrant mother in Lahiri's fiction keeps her links with her motherland. I focus on how her works present different mothers who have different approaches as far as cultural aspects, the maintenance of culinary habits and the use of the language in the realm of the domestic space are concerned.

CHAPTER TWO

The Mother as Negotiator and Mediator

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The Mother as Negotiator and Mediator

"And yet it was for him, for Sonia,
that his parents had gone to the trouble of
learning these customs.
It was for their sake that it had
come to all this."
(Lahiri, *The Namesake* 286)

The culture of a nation involves culinary habits, the language spoken, the ways of dressing and behaving, as well as oral narratives and songs. When abroad, immigrants usually try to reproduce and maintain those cultural aspects, as James Clifford points out: "fundamental values of propriety and religion, speech and social patterns, and food, body, and dress protocols are preserved and adapted in a network of ongoing connections outside the host country" (259). Thus, the maintenance of traditions abroad provides connections among diasporic subjects, even if there is negotiation and adaptation involved in such maintenance.

This chapter is a continuation of the previous section, in which I analyzed the role of the mother in the public and domestic spaces. In this chapter I analyze how the mothers negotiate their space in-between two cultures specifically through the teaching of customs and dressing habits, culinary practices and the use of Bengali language at home. In the first part, I discuss the teaching of habits, holidays and clothing. The second part of this chapter, dedicated to the role of food and culinary habits, analyzes how culinary practices provide communion among scattered subjects and how the food from one's motherland may evoke fond memories of the mother. In addition, I propose

an investigation of how food is one of the ways immigrant mothers find to reconnect themselves to their home country and simultaneously negotiate with their children in the host country. Finally, in the third part of this chapter I discuss the importance of the negotiation between languages in the private space of home, investigating the role of language for diasporic subjects portrayed in Lahiri's fiction.

2.1 - Negotiating Two Cultures: Habits, Holidays and Clothing

"…clothes, not fate, made her life."

(Ali 298)

"They have come to rely on her ... to collect them together, to organize the holiday, to convert it, to introduce the tradition to those who are new."

(Lahiri, *The Namesake* 286)

At first glance, it seems that some of Lahiri's women characters are resistant to the host country's culture because they are usually portrayed as typical and traditional Bengali wives who do not give up their homeland's traditions, especially as far as clothing and behavior are concerned. A fine example is Ashima, from the novel *The Namesake*, who, as a diasporic mother, is able to make, remake, and recreate her life and her children's lives in the host country. Her negotiations with the host country also depict the immigrant woman as empowered "with a transnational status that allows her to partake at will of both American and her Bengali Indian cultures, without idealizing either one or glossing over the negotiations that she has to make" (Alfonso-Forero 163).

David Lynn notes that Ashima and Ashoke will spend "the rest of their lives making these kinds of accommodations. They will always be strangers in a strange, if welcoming, land" (162). Ashima, who has promised herself never to change, gradually makes accommodations, assimilating the culture of the USA. For example, she looks forward to Christmas, as the holiday becomes an occasion for her to meet her Bengali acquaintances and her children who live in other states.

Ashima is portrayed as a traditional Indian wife who faithfully plays her role as submissive wife and dedicated mother. When leaving India, Ashima's grandmother advises her to embrace the new opportunity by saying: "Do what I will never do. It will all be for the best. Remember that" (38). Her grandmother's advice represents an achievement her grandmother will never do, that is, the possibility of starting a new life in an unfamiliar land. Thus, Ashima is the first generation of the family to go abroad, and her grandmother reminds her that the experience may be a positive one. However, in the first chapters of the novel she misses India terribly, and at first finds it difficult to adapt to the new life abroad. Consequently, she makes an effort to preserve her Indianness inside her house on Pemberton Road, acting as a typical Bengali wife who never says her husband's name and who is always calculating the Indian time and thinking about what her family would be doing at that time in India. Ashima introduces her children to her motherland's customs, taking the children to attend Bengali plays, dance performances, and sitar recitals. It is through their mother that Gogol and Sonia learn about Bengali traditional holidays such as the worship of Durga and Saraswati, as the narrator observes:

> during pujos, scheduled for convenience on two Saturdays a year, Gogol and Sonia are dragged off to a high school or a Knights of Columbus hall

> overtaken by Bengalis, where they are required to throw marigold petals at a cardboard effigy of a goddess and eat bland vegetarian food. (64)

In addition, they go to Bengali language and culture lessons twice a month in which they read "handouts written in English about the Bengali Renaissance, and the revolutionary exploits of Subhas Chandra Bose" (66). However, the children do not respond positively to their mother's attempts to inculcate the Indian culture on them. Instead, they study the Bengali culture without interest and are not excited over the coming of the Bengali holidays.

Take, for instance, the Bengali custom of taking the shoes off when entering a house. It is a practice frequently taught by the diasporic mother characters in an effort to preserve Indianness inside their houses. Mrs. Sen, from Lahiri's short story "Mrs. Sen's" is not a mother, but nonetheless she represents a mother figure, as she is a babysitter to Eliot, an American boy. By teaching Eliot the ritual of placing his shoes on a bookcase at the entrance of the home as soon as he enters the house, Mrs. Sen shows him about an aspect of the culture of her homeland and serves as a mediator between cultures.

Nevertheless, the second generation portrayed in Lahiri's fiction usually gives up the tradition of walking barefoot inside the house as soon as they reach adulthood. In *The Namesake*, Gogol "occasionally wanders through the house with his running sneakers on" (75) and when visiting his parents' home with his girlfriend Maxine he walks in "with his shoes on instead of changing into a pair of flip-flops that his parents keep in the hall closet" (146). Gogol refuses to walk barefoot at home, especially in the presence of his American girlfriend. This attitude can be seen as a kind of negation of his Indian cultural background and an attempt to blend in and be accepted in the

American society.

Ruma, in "Unaccustomed Earth" also abandons the habit of taking her shoes off. For her that was "one of the many habits of her upbringing which she'd shed in her adult life, without knowing when or why" (14). Perhaps because she marries an American man and her children are born in the USA, Ruma does not adopt the habit of walking barefoot in her home, choosing instead to behave as Americans do. Akash, Ruma's son, learns the tradition of removing the shoes when his grandfather is visiting them, not with his mother Ruma, as could be expected. Therefore, in this story the grandfather plays the role usually played by the mother, because the mother belongs to the second generation.

If the habit of removing one's shoes when entering a house is a preservation of the Indian culture abroad in the domestic space, which is traditionally occupied by the mother characters, a sari can be considered a way of recognizing the Indian woman in the public space. Agnew affirms that Indian women's way of dressing "marks them as immigrants and newcomers" ("Language Matters" 24), implying that their saris unify them in a style of dress that marks them as Indian in a foreign land. As Saiyeda Khatun points out, a sari "means more to an Indian woman than just a way to cover her body. It's a work of art, a treasured possession, almost a language through which she communicates" (242). Indeed, a sari is such an essential part of the dressing habits of Bengali women that it becomes a cultural marker capable of promoting "cultural distinctiveness in the public space" (Dufoix 73). In this sense, saris are for the Indian women a way of identifying themselves with their motherland customs and culture when abroad.

For Lahiri's mother characters in the novel *The Namesake* and in the stories

"Unaccustomed Earth," "Hell-Heaven," "Hema & Kaushik," and "The Third and Final Continent," a sari is more than a piece of cloth, it is a way of recognizing fellow women members of their homeland. The two mothers from the story "Hema and Kaushik" meet each other in a park, a public space, when Hema's mother was pregnant. They become friends because of their common origin, as signified through their clothing and appearance: Kaushik's mother noticed a "young Bengali woman in a sari, wearing vermilion in her hair" (224). The friendship which started during pregnancy through their similar way of dressing is then developed and when Hema is born Kaushik's parents visit her in the hospital. Later, Lahiri describes Hema and Kaushik's mothers' appearances and the narrative voice's conclusion is that "the bond between them [was] clear" (231). Their way of dressing makes them visible and helps them identify their common origin.

By the same token, in "Hell-Heaven" Aparna, Usha's mother, meets Pranab Chakraborty, a single Indian man, and he starts going to their home and being treated as part of the family, as an adopted uncle to Usha. Pranab recognizes her as a Bengali because she is dressed as a typical Bengali woman, "wearing the red and white bangles … a common Tangail sari, and [having] a thick stem of vermilion powder in the center parting of her hair" (61). Likely, Mala, the Bengali bride in "The Third and Final Continent," is recognized by her groom at the airport not only by her accessories, her gold bracelets, or the "small red circle [which] was painted on her forehead, and the edges of her feet [which] were tinted with a decorative red dye" (191). Mala is recognized by the way her sari was arranged over her head, in the way the groom's mother would wear it. This detail shows a connection between Bengali women in the way they treasure their saris. Not only Aparna, Hema's mother, and Mala's saris,

but also the vermilion powder on their hair, are cultural markers that make them visible as Indian married women in the USA.

Like the protagonist in Monica Ali's *Brick Lane*, as seen in the epigraph to this chapter, Ashima believes that "clothes, not fate, made her life" (298). In Ali's novel, the protagonist realizes that her way of dressing speaks a lot about her cultural choices. Similarly, Ashima is always wearing a sari, a decision which demonstrates that she wants to be recognized as an Indian woman. The only occasion in which she does not wear a sari is when her children are born. As part of the descriptions of her childbirth labor, her arrival at the hospital is marked by her changing of clothes. She feels embarrassed when in the hospital she has to change her sari for a gown that reaches her knees, and a nurse, who probably is not used to that kind of clothing, "exasperated by the six slippery yards, ends up stuffing the material into Ashima's slate blue suitcase" (2). However, as soon as she and her baby are discharged from the hospital, she is "dressed once again in her wrinkled silk sari" (29), as if having it removed were part of her adaptation to motherhood in the USA. Conversely, when Sonia, Gogol's sister is born, Gogol realizes that his mother arrives home from the hospital wearing a bathrobe instead of a sari. This choice strikes Gogol as remarkable since he used to connect his mother's image with the saris she wears. Ashima's choice for the bathrobe can represent her adaptation to the USA, as she already knows that in the hospital she will be required to change her sari for a gown or a robe. However, as soon as she returns home, she puts her sari back on. When Ashima accepts to remove her sari, but puts it back afterwards, it shows that she is open to negotiation with the culture of the host country, but will not let go of her own cultural background.

In their trips to Calcutta, where Ashima would become Monu, as her relatives

call her, she and her husband would "slip into bolder, less complicated versions of themselves, their voices louder, their smiles wider" (81). Not only do her voice and her smile change when she arrives back in India, but also her clothes. Before landing, she "slips into the bathroom and changes, miraculously in that minuscule space, into a fresh sari" (81), as if by changing clothes she were preparing herself to be back to her motherland. It may be argued that Ashima's clothes are part of her identity as an Indian woman, and that, although she is open to accept the American way of wearing a gown after the childbirth, she will refuse to wear American clothes permanently.

Saris are such treasured clothing items that Indian mothers consider them inheritance to be kept for the next generation, as it happens in "Unaccustomed Earth" and "Hema and Kaushik." However, the second generation usually resists wearing saris, preferring instead jeans and pants. Ruma from "Unaccustomed Earth," after her mother's death, divides up her mother's hundreds of saris among her mother's friends, keeping only three of them, which she places at the back of her closet. Her mother, when alive, predicts that that would happen "lamenting the fact that her daughter preferred pants and skirts to the clothing she wore" (17). By the same token, the mother in "Hema and Kaushik," in her hospital bed during her last days, enlists her saris as a legacy to her Bengali women friends, and the rest was given to charities in India, because she did not want "all that beautiful material turned into curtains" (257) by people who accidentally might not know the value of that Bengali clothing.

In Lahiri's "Hell-Heaven," an American boy invites Usha, Aparna's teenager daughter, for a walk but she refuses because she considers her Bengali clothes and shoes as inappropriate for joining the group. She is given a pair of her friend Deborah's jeans, a sweater and sneakers, so that she looks like Deborah and her sister. She affirms

that by wearing the jeans she finally feels like herself despite her mother's silent stare at her: "in the jeans I'd had to roll up and in which I felt finally like myself, I noticed my mother lift her eyes from her teacup and stare at me, but she said nothing, and off I went" (80). In this case, changing her traditional Bengali clothes for the borrowed jeans is a way for the daughter to identify herself with the North-American culture and reject, at least at that moment, her mother's heritage.

Differently from the other mother characters discussed above, in *The Lowland* Gauri changes her appearance in order to deny her Indian ancestry. In the first months of her life in the USA she destroys her saris and cuts her hair short. One day, arriving home from work, Subhash, her husband, finds that "all of her saris, and her petticoats and blouses, were lying in ribbons and scraps of various shapes and sizes, as if an animal had shredded the fabric with its teeth and claws" (141). Subhash demands from Gauri a reason why she has done so and she just explains she was tired of the Indian clothes and her long hair. Gauri decides to blend in the American society, wearing jeans and western clothes. Nevertheless, years later, she realizes that "in spite of her jeans and boots and belted cardigan, or perhaps because of them, Gauri knew she stood out" (171). She refuses to wear Indian clothes in order not to be distinguished as a woman of Indian descendant but somehow she is not able to totally deny her Indian background.

When Bela, Gauri's daughter is born, Gauri does not teach her the Indian traditions of dress and hairstyles. It is only when visiting India for the first time that Bela learns to have her hair braided. Her grandmother combs her hair, teaching her to keep it braided, "two on either side for now, one at the center when [she is] older" (197). She asks Bela if her mother taught her to keep it tied, and as the narrator observes, "her mother had never told her this. Her mother wore her hair as short as a

man's" (197). Gauri behaves as an American woman, wearing short hair and not wearing saris. Even though Bela wants to buy a sari to her mother, her father says that she never wears them – probably remembering the episode in which he finds Gauri's saris scattered in the bedroom. Gauri's decision to shred all her Indian clothes and to keep her hair short may be seen as an attempt to negate her identity as an Indian woman. Besides, it seems that, by deciding not to teach the Indian traditions to her daughter, Gauri is not only negating her Indian origins, but also not preserving them when she does not teach them to the next generation.

Male characters in Lahiri's fiction seem not to distinguish themselves by their style of dress the way their wives do. Ruma's father resembles an American but her mother used to stick out "in her brightly colored saris, her dime-sized maroon bindi, her jewels" (11). In Lahiri's first novel, Ashima "continues to wear nothing but saris and sandals from Bata, [but] Ashoke, accustomed to wearing tailor-made pants and shirts all his life, learns to buy ready-made" (65). Moreover, during the Bengali meetings promoted by the Gangulis, women would wear saris "far more dazzling than the pants and polo shirts their husbands wear" (72-73). Whereas women remain attached to their homeland's clothing as an identity to be preserved, men blend in the American culture way of dressing in a much easier way than their wives.

However, when it comes to the second generation, it seems that both men and women adopt the host country's style of dressing. In *The Namesake*, Gogol is dressed as a Bengali in only two occasions of his life: in his rice ceremony as a baby, and in his Bengali wedding ceremony when an adult. In his *annaprasan* Gogol is dressed as "an infant Bengali groom, in a pale yellow pajama-punjabi from his grandmother in Calcutta" (39). Even though the name his grandmother chooses for him is lost in the

mail between Calcutta and the USA, Gogol receives clothing made by his grandmother in his first official Bengali ceremony. However, in their trips to India, Gogol and Sonia stand out in their "bright, expensive sneakers, American haircuts, backpacks slung over one shoulder" (82). Along their childhood and adulthood, Gogol and Sonia will blend in in the American culture, wearing western clothes despite their Indian background.

The only occasion in which Gogol wears Bengali clothes as an adult is when he marries Moushumi, whom he meets and dates following his mother's suggestions. They decide on a Bengali ceremony and they dress accordingly. Gogol inherits Bengali clothing from his father, which is given to him by his mother, who is now a widow. She brings him "the things he is to wear, a parchment-colored Punjabi top that had once belonged to his father, a prepleated dhoti with a drawstring waist, a pair of nagrai slippers with curling toes" (220). It is the first time Gogol has seen Moushumi in a sari "apart from all those pujos years ago, which she had suffered through silently" (222). This episode demonstrates that, as a child, the obligation of wearing Indian clothes in special ceremonies is a suffering for Moushumi, but that she suffers it silently, as if she has no choice but to obey in order not to create conflicts. However, when she becomes an adult, she decides to wear only Western clothes and negotiates with her Indian background only partially, wearing the sari in the wedding ceremony but choosing the gown. Moushumi's mother disapproves of her gown that bares her "slim, bronze shoulders, which quietly sparkle from a special powder she's applied to them" (223) and protests, "what was wrong with a salwar kameeze, she'd wanted to know" (223). She manages, "in the midst of that great crowd, to shoot her reproachful glances, which Moushumi ignores" (223). Thus, although Gogol and Moushumi accept the tradition of a Bengali wedding ceremony, Gogol changes into a suit and Moushumi into a gown;

westernized clothes which show that they have adapted the American culture to their Indian background. Moreover, in Moushumi's case, it might be an attempt to affirm her identity as an American adult woman.

Another interesting point is the way mother characters deal with holidays such as Halloween, Christmas and Thanksgiving. Halloween is an American holiday often favored by children in general, including immigrants. In *The Lowland*, one of the pictures Gauri prints to take to her Indian mother-in-law shows Bela, her daughter, "dressed up as Red Riding Hood for Halloween, holding a bowl heaped with candy to give away" (200). However, the grandmother does not want to keep the pictures, perhaps because they remind her that her granddaughter was born in the USA, not in her house as she once wished.

In "When Mr. Pirzada Came to Dine" the Indian mother learns the tradition of Halloween with her daughter and then introduces it to Mr. Pirzada, assuring him that there is no danger in letting Lilia go outside at night, and that "all the children will be out" (38). In addition the mother helps Lilia to prepare her witch costume, giving her and her American friend "two burlap sacks that had once contained basmati rice, for collecting candy" (37), which shows a confluence of traditions, as the bag for collecting candies is made of sack of basmati rice, a traditional Bengali food. In addition, people give candies to Lilia telling her "they had never seen an Indian witch before" (39). In this sense, Lilia's background as an Indian descendant is present even when she tries to blend in the American culture. However, it is Lilia's mother who buys a "ten-pound pumpkin, fat and round, and place[s] it on the dining table" (35) and who tells the daughter "to decorate it with markers" (35). When the daughter asks to carve the pumpkin instead of using markers, the mother concedes to her plea and joins Lilia,

teaching Mr. Pirzada how to carve a scary face on it. The moment of carving a pumpkin becomes a moment of communion for the immigrants, as the narrator acknowledges: "for the first time we all gathered around the dining table, my mother, my father, Mr. Pirzada and I" (35). The fact that the family gets together to celebrate Halloween shows that here, instead of the adults teaching the Indian traditions to the child, it is the daughter who teaches the American traditions to her parents and Mr. Pirzada, who are open to learn a custom from the host land.

In "Hema & Kaushik" Kaushik does not celebrate Christmas with his father after the death of his mother. However, in the following year, Kaushik is surprised by the fact that his father, now in his new life married to Chitra, Kaushik's stepmother, does not toss out the Christmas decorations from the last Christmas his mother celebrated. Instead, he reuses the ornaments, a decision which reveals Kaushik's father attempt to introduce the American holiday to his new wife Chitra and his Indian stepdaughters, who are still getting accustomed to the host country's traditions and customs. In this story it is the stepfather, not the mother, who teaches the American traditions to his stepdaughters who are still getting accustomed to the USA.

Kaushik remembers his mother used to celebrate Christmas in India, "stringing lights throughout [their] flat and putting presents under a potted hibiscus" (265). Here, the Indian mother preserves the American holiday in India, lamenting that it is not the same "without the cold weather, the decorated shops, the cards that came in the mail" (265). She compares the holiday in Cambridge to Bombay, speaking fondly of the USA and the weather in December. It is a reverse situation, in which the mother, instead of returning to her Indian traditions when moving back to India, chooses instead to celebrate the American holidays in her motherland. Interestingly, Kaushik connects the

memory of Christmas, an American holiday, with the memory of his Indian mother.

Not only Kaushik's mother, but also Gogol and Sonia's mother learn how to celebrate Christmas. For Christmas, they begin buying a small Christmas tree. Then, gradually, Ashima improves the celebrations and they "nail a wreath to their door in December, [wrap] woolen scarves around snowmen … hang stockings on the fireplace mantel, and set out cookies and milk for Santa Claus, and receive heaps of presents" (64). In *The Namesake* Ashima starts making those concessions in order to please her children and as Silva affirms, "it is a matter of addition and negotiation, rather than loss and acceptance" (115). For Easter, the Gangulis color "boiled eggs violet and pink at Easter and hide them around the house" (64). The Gangulis celebrate Thanksgiving as well, and they learn to roast turkeys but flavor it with Indian spices. When her children grow up, Ashima realizes she has learned so much about being mediator in-between cultures that she celebrates Christmas with other Bengali women, converting the holiday according to their homeland's culture. Hence, at their Christmas parties their food is Indian, and the songs they play are Bengali. Ashima makes her own Christmas cards, decorating them with elephants and other typical Indian drawings. The Christmas cards are probably written in Bengali to their Bengali friends who are abroad. It shows that although they accept the culture of the host land they also maintain their own Indian habits in an act of negotiation.

It is clear that in *The Namesake* Ashima makes accommodations and concessions because of her children. This is evident when she and Ashoke do not bother to buy a turkey to commemorate the holiday in a year when their children do not come home for the holiday, an attitude typical of American grown-up children. Gogol recognizes in the end that it was for him and his sister "that his parents had gone to the

trouble of learning these customs. It was for their sake that it had come to all this" (286). It is for the sake of Gogol and Sonia that Ashima starts celebrating the North-American holidays, but it is also for the sake of the preservation of her own culture that she teaches them Indian traditions as well. After her husband's death, Ashima does not celebrate Thanksgiving at their home, but she travels to New York to spend the holiday with Gogol and Moushumi, her daughter in-law. In New York Ashima goes with Moushumi's mother to the butcher in order to buy goat meat and then they go to a concert of classical Indian music, an episode which shows that even when celebrating the American holidays, the mothers are concerned with keeping in touch with India cultural aspects.

As I have analyzed, whereas some of Lahiri's mothers characters are portrayed as mediators in-between two different worlds, as it is Ashima's case, other mothers decide to blend in the host country's culture, as it happens with Gauri and Kaushik's mother. Some mother characters commit themselves to the learning of the host country's culture and do not teach their offspring about their Indian traditions. Others establish a bridge between their motherland and the host country cultures and customs. Therefore, each story offers a different approach to how the mother characters deal with the host country's culture.

2.2 - The Mother's Food: A Taste of Nostalgia

"Normally he harbored no nostalgia for the particular elements of his upbringing, adapting to so many cuisines throughout his adult life. But this food caused him to

feel strangely sentimental."

(Lahiri, "Hema and Kaushik" 325)

"It is odd to see his father presiding in the kitchen, standing in his mother's place at the stove … Though his father remembers to mix up the rice and curry for Gogol beforehand, he doesn't bother to shape it into individual balls the way his mother does."

(Lahiri, *The Namesake* 54-55)

Like clothing, food and culinary habits are very important themes in Jhumpa Lahiri's fiction, first and foremost, because food is part of the culture of a country and it is one of the main aspects diasporic subjects maintain when abroad. In Anita Mannur's words, food "lends meaning to the lives of immigrants uprooted from familiar cultural contexts" ("Culinary Maladies" 23). In addition, Mannur also advocates the importance of problematizing the relations between memory and food, explaining that "the desire to remember home by fondly recreating culinary memories cannot be understood merely as reflectively nostalgic gestures" ("Culinary Nostalgia" 13). She claims that it is paramount to "route memory and nostalgic longing for a homeland through one's relationship to seemingly intractable culinary practices which yoke national identity with culinary taste and practices" ("Culinary Nostalgia" 13). In this sense, it is relevant to analyze not only the issues of food and memory but also the aspects of nationalism embedded in culinary practices. Thus, the purpose of this section is to analyze how food and culinary habits can be representative of the connections among diasporic women characters, how the mother makes use of food to negotiate between both the USA and Indian cultures, and how the space of the kitchen may be connected to the presence and

memory of the mother and the motherland in Lahiri's fiction.

There is nothing more national than the culinary habits of a country. Fred Gardaphé affirms that "food is a cultural sign that participates in the representations of race, ethnicity, gender, class, nationality, and exile" (10). According to him, "food often has an ability to last longer as a signifier for ethnicity than other markers, such as language and fashion" (7). It is possible to say the cooking of typical food can often be a way for immigrants to remember their homeland and reaffirm their affiliation to their mother country. Asha Choubey defends the important role played by culinary habits as part of the culture of a people when affirming that food is "part of the cyclical pattern of life; food is culture" (1). Shameem Black, who echoes this argument, states that "food has acquired a particularly powerful role as a cultural signifier" (6) in South Asian diaspora. Therefore, the maintenance of the national cuisine signifies for scattered subjects the reassertion of their identity, not only as individuals but also as a community.

Moreover, eating habits represent the connections immigrants establish with their motherland in diasporic contexts. As Black puts it, the engagement with the eating habits promotes the creation of a group identity in diaspora (19). In their meetings, the Bengali community abroad often shares rice and Indian food together, promoting communion in a sphere where "the ancestral culture is duplicated, the cuisine maintained, and the home simply transferred to the comfort zone of America" (Mishra 187). Eating together gives them a sense of fellowship and belonging. As the preparation of food is traditionally a woman's task, Black explains that it "is often seen as an extension of maternal practices of feeding, tied both psychologically and socially to acts of female reproduction" (4). Therefore, cooking becomes for immigrant women

a signifier of both a connection to the home country, as well as an expression of their care towards their children. The first feeding of the child usually comes from the mother through breast feeding, which deeply connects the child to the mother. In addition, it is usually the mother who is responsible to feed the child, first by offering maternal milk, then by cooking the meals to be offered to the child. Thus, motherhood and food are interrelated concepts.

Significantly, food is also usually connected with the memory of the mother and her presence in the space of the kitchen, as discussed in chapter one. In Black's words, domestic cooking often "anchor[s] national, ethnic, or regional identities" (4), that is, domestic culinary defines the borders of cultures. Black also explains that while domestic habits "can provide reassuring moments that distinguish a diasporic subject from the dominant surrounding culture, they also provide spaces where individuals can attempt to embrace new practices and reconfigure traditional ones" (7). In addition, Mannur affirms that for the first generation of immigrants, "culinary identities have been vitally shaped and reshaped" ("Culinary Maladies" 23), which means that in the process of adapting themselves to the host country, their culinary identities are also adapted. Therefore, culinary practices have multiple dimensions: they can connect the diasporic subjects to their left homeland but they can also be part of the negotiations with the host country.

Memory is also an important factor which is related to food habits. Black points out that food serves as "powerful sources of memory and nostalgia for group ties" (20), implying that the smells and tastes of the homeland's food become tokens of nostalgia for diasporic subjects. Indeed, food has the power to evoke memories from the past, to the point that it "brings as much pleasure as mother's voice on overseas calls"

(Choubey 1). It is possible to assert that diasporic subjects are, in Suleri's words, "entirely passionate about such matters as the eating habits of the motherland" (303) and that as a consequence, immigrants tend to feel reconnected to each other when they taste in the host country the food they prepared when in their home country.

In Lahiri's fiction, food often functions as "the means through which the women characters assert agency in their diasporic contexts. In these stories culinary practices both reenact the homeland and articulate difference" (Gardaphé 8). For example, the first lines of Lahiri's first novel portray Ashima pregnant in her Cambridge, Massachusetts kitchen, trying to combine ingredients in order to prepare a typical Indian meal. Although she is aware that "her meals will never taste the way they do in India" (Alfonso-Forero 153), Ashima has been consuming "this concoction throughout her pregnancy, a humble approximation of the snack sold for pennies on Calcutta sidewalks and on railway platforms throughout India, spilling from newspaper cones" (1). The craving for food so typical of pregnant women is also Ashima's homesick craving for Indian food, "even now that there is barely space inside her," (1) Indian food is "the one thing she craves" (1). Even after her pregnancy she continues "at times, to mix Rice Krispies and peanuts and onions in a bowl" (49). According to Laura Williams, the "commonplace spicy snack that Ashima concocts evokes both home and displacement, abundance and lack, well-stocked American cupboards as well as a certain hunger" (77). Thus, from the start, "the universal cravings of pregnancy are imprinted as well with issues of identity ... Ashima is satisfying her longing for India with this strange hybrid of American cereal and chilies" (Lynn 162). She misses her motherland and tries to fill up the void by cooking Indian typical food. However, even though the preparation of this food symbolizes a connection to her motherland, it also

shows openness to the host country, as she is willing to mix ingredients found in an American supermarket in order to prepare an Indian meal that will be hybrid because of the mixture of American and Indian ingredients.

Meals and food items are also one of the aspects through which the mother Ashima negotiates between her motherland India and the USA. For Gogol's birthdays she orders a cake (66) but prepares a Bengali celebration as well. When they go to the supermarket, they let Gogol choose "cheese, mayonnaise, tuna fish, hot dogs" (65), but she does not consume this food. She "concedes and makes him an American dinner once a week as a treat, Shake 'n Bake chicken or Hamburger Helper prepared with ground lamb" (65). By mixing ingredients she finds in a supermarket in Boston in order to prepare Indian food, she promotes the adaptations and negotiations she needs to be connected to India whilst interacting with the food of her host country. The result of this mixing is that the food she prepares will be hybrid, not totally American, nor Indian, like her children and herself become.

Food is connected not only with Ashima's cravings for Indian food but also with her role as a mother. As Tamara Bhalla points out, food and descriptions of ethnic cuisine, cooking, and eating dominate Ashima's appearances in *The Namesake*" (119). When Ashima is having childbirth contractions in hospital she considers her condition as a foreign mother and thinks of her family in India, "in the kitchen of her parents' flat on Amherst Street … a servant is pouring after-dinner tea into steaming glasses, arranging Marie biscuits on a tray" (4-5). Ashima connects her memories of her mother and her motherland with food, and she remembers her motherland and the space of the kitchen, an intimate and private space for her and the women of her family. On another occasion, Ashima remembers that when she left India to go to Boston her grandmother

"had entered the kitchen after over a decade's retirement to cook Ashima a light goat and potato stew" (37). She connects the memory of her women ancestors with the culinary habits of her motherland and the space of the kitchen.

When Ashima's children grow up and her husband moves to another city because of his job, she becomes careless both about cooking and eating habits again, and about dishwashing procedures, leaving dishwashing liquid on the cups (165). She starts eating on the sofa "simple meals of buttered toast and dal, a single pot lasting her a week and an omelette to go with it if she has energy to bother … standing in front of the refrigerator, not bothering to heat up the food in the oven or to put it on a plate" (162), like her children used to do when they were teenagers. Her husband and her children were the reason why she used to prepare Indian meals. Once they are absent, because of her husband's death and her children's leaving home for college, she has no motivation to cook as before. As in her second pregnancy, widowhood robs Ashima of the pleasure to cook and, in the absence of her husband, she transfers the task of cooking to her daughter Sonia. When Gogol comes to visit "often it's Sonia who does the cooking" (189), as if the task of cooking Indian food were an inheritance Ashima leaves to Sonia.

In "Hema & Kaushik" Parul, Kaushik's mother, becomes careless about cooking as well. She suffers from breast cancer and as consequence she is "no longer interested in cooking, as she had been in the Cambridge days" (242). She says she had been spoiled by the cook she had in Bombay and only keeps company to Hema's mother at the kitchen, "occasionally peeling or slicing something" (242). It is as if the fact she is sick robs her of her energy to cook. Similarly, in the same story Indian food is connected with the memory of the mother. As an adult, Kaushik has no nostalgia "for

the particular elements of his upbringing, adapting to so many cuisines throughout his adult life" (325). However, the food he tastes at a resort causes him "to feel strangely sentimental" (325). Kaushik finds odd this sudden nostalgia because after his mother's death he gets unaccustomed to Indian food, perhaps because her death has weakened his bonds with India. However, through the eating of a typical food Kaushik is reminded of his childhood, of the food his mother used to cook when he was a little boy, thus, connecting the memory of his mother with Indian food and his heritage.

In Lahiri's *The Namesake*, the Bengali parents have to order "pizza or Chinese [e]specially for the kids" (63) at their meetings, because their teenager children usually complain of eating Indian food. In their trips to Calcutta, Sonia and Gogol "are given cups of Horlick's, plates of syrupy, spongy rossogollas for which they have no appetite but which they dutifully eat" (82), which shows that the typical Indian food does not seem attractive to the young children, but they have a sense of obedience that leads them to accept what they are offered to eat. However, when they become adults they nostalgically crave the food eaten in childhood. In Sonia's case, her mother teaches "her to cook the food [she] had complained of eating as a child" (279). It is possible to affirm that the identification with Indian food, although it takes place later in the character's life, may symbolize a return to the roots, the affirmation of one's belonging to the mother's culture.

A typical Indian custom is the habit of eating rice with fingers, which, according to Choubey is in "great favor with Indians settled abroad" (3). In *The Namesake* Ashima instructs Gogol to eat with his fingers as a typical Indian boy, "not to let the food stain the skin of his palm" (55). Accordingly, in "The Third and Final Continent" Mala teaches her son how to eat rice with his hands but is aware that perhaps it is

something “he will no longer do after [she] die[s]” (197). In fact, the habit of eating with the hands seems to be a custom that Indian descendants in the USA maintain only when in the presence of their parents.

Nevertheless, not all the mothers are portrayed in the same way. In “Unaccustomed Earth” Ruma only eats with her fingers because of the presence of her father in her house: “she ate with her fingers, as her father did, for the first time in months, for the first time in this new house in Seattle” (22). Therefore, it is a custom she does not teach her son, Akash, who sat between her and her father “wanting to eat with his fingers, too, but this was something Ruma had not taught him to do” (22). Gauri, from *The Lowland*, despite being a first generation Indian, is another example of a mother who does not teach the custom of eating with hands to her daughter Bela while in the USA. It is only on her first trip to India that Bela tries “to pick up rice and lentils with her fingers, [but] her grandmother [tells] Deepa to fetch a spoon” (194). In this episode Bijoli, the grandmother, prefers asking the servant to bring a spoon instead of teaching her granddaughter how to eat with her fingers. Besides, she asks the servant to give Bela the boiled water because she’s “not made to survive [t]here” (194). It seems that Bijoli does so not in an act of rejection, but of acceptance. Like Akash, Bela is being raised by an Indian mother who does not teach her Indian traditions. However, differently from Akash’s grandfather, who teaches him how to eat with his fingers, Bijoli accepts the fact that her granddaughter is born in the USA and therefore she sees no point in teaching her a tradition the girl will not maintain because her own mother eats with a fork and knife in the USA.

Before leaving her house at Pemberton Road, Ashima throws a Christmas party for the Bengali friends she met in Boston. She spends days preparing the “dal coated

with a thick skin that will rupture as soon as the first of it is served, a roasted cauliflower dish, eggplant, a korma of lamb … sweet yogurt and pantuas for dessert" (277). Although she enjoys the effort of preparing alone the snacks she will serve to her guests, "to decide on a menu, to make a list and shop in the supermarket and fill the refrigerator shelves with food" (277), she remembers the first parties she threw in the USA, when her husband and her small children would stand in the kitchen together helping her. She probably remembers spending a week preparing "the biryani, the carp in yogurt sauce, the dal, the six different vegetable dishes" (39) for Gogol's rice ceremony. She also remembers when she would sit and talk with her husband at the kitchen table, "boiling rice and warming the previous night's leftovers, filling their stomachs … sleepy and sated, as their palms turned yellow and dry" (165). Ashima remembers those moments because they marked her experience of motherhood in the USA, when eating together was both a moment of negotiation as well of communion for the Ganguli family.

Ashima prides herself on each Bengali friend with whom she "has had the fortune to share rice with in a foreign land" (159-160) and her Bengali friends become "a surrogate family and a microcosm of the India that was left behind" (Alfonso-Forero 158). Indeed, since her arrival in the USA she manages to create around herself a community of other diasporic Bengali women and mothers who get together for celebrations, to share experiences, and to create in the USA a reproduction of India. Culinary habits help Ashima to construct a sense of connection to India while simultaneously establishing the negotiations between the host country and their motherland.

Moreover, Ashima's relationship to food changes as she becomes accustomed to

the eating habits of the host country and she both learns from and teaches her Bengali friends how to prepare American food. Her friends are newly arrived wives from India, and they turn to her "for recipes and advice, and she tells them about the carp that's sold in Chinatown, that it's possible to make halwa from Cream of Wheat" (38), about the kind butcher "on Prospect Street willing to pull [the chicken's skin] off" (5) and how she makes yogurt "from half-and-half and sandesh from ricotta cheese" (276). These accommodations are acts of negotiation and represent Ashima's ability to be mobile in-between cultures. According to Ann Marie Alfonso-Forero, this "gendered knowledge, represented … by the substitution of ingredients, is symbolic of Ashima's ability to move between cultures" (157). Hence, they represent the adaptations the mother makes in order to create another culture, one which is neither totally Indian nor totally American, but a blended mixture of both.

The community of Bengali friends and the possibility of sharing Indian food are crucial aspects not only for Ashima, but also for Kaushik's stepmother and Hema's mother in the story "Hema and Kaushik," and Aparna in "Hell-Heaven." Chitra, Kaushik's stepmother, chooses to move to a place where "there were other Bengalis nearby and an Indian grocery" (292). For her, more important than the architecture of the house is the opportunity to be surrounded by Bengalis and Indian food. In addition, in the same story Hema remembers "the rooms filled with the smell of lamb curry and pullao" (223), the smell of the Indian food prepared by her mother nostalgically reminding her of her childhood years, when her mother would spend hours preparing food to be served in a party to her Bengali friends. Hema's mother is present in her memory through her presence in the space of the kitchen, preparing the typical food that would be served to Bengali guests.

Similarly, in “Hell-Heaven,” Aparna would anxiously expect Pranab’s visit so that she could share food with him and have a kind of communion with another Bengali. Her daughter remembers that Aparna is always found “in the kitchen, rolling out dough for luchis” (63). Aparna does not celebrate Thanksgiving and she and her husband treat the holiday as if it were “Memorial Day or Veterans Day - just another holiday in the American year” (77). Even though Aparna and her husband do not celebrate Thanksgiving, to the point their daughter remembers that for her parents “the ritual of a large sit-down dinner and the foods that one was supposed to eat was lost on them” (77), they welcome Pranab Chakraborty in their house. He expresses his gratitude affirming that Aparna “hosted [his] first real Thanksgiving in America. It might have been an afternoon in May, but that first meal at Aparna’s table was Thanksgiving to [him]” (79). The sharing of food is like Thanksgiving for him and it is the reason, he says, he manages to stay in the host country. By serving Pranab Chakraborty meals that resemble his mother’s Indian food is it as if they were celebrating Thanksgiving in the Indian way, providing communion through the sharing of food together. This communion between scattered subjects in diasporic spaces is relevant because the ties are usually established through the sharing of Indian food. Therefore, the “Indian meals bring together friends and family” (Alfonso-Forero 138) and the moment of having meals together is for them a way of communion and connection with each other, a way of sharing their common culture and habits. Therefore, in “Hell-Heaven” and “Hema and Kaushik” the mothers are present in the memory of their children through their presence in the kitchen, preparing the typical food that would be served to Bengali guests.

Although it is clear the importance of the role of the mother characters in the

maintenance of culinary habits in Lahiri's fiction, it is also relevant to observe that the author portrays mothers who are not involved in the preparation of food, as it happens with Ruma and Gauri. It seems that, whilst cooking of Indian typical food is usually relevant to subjects in transit, some of the mother characters such as Ashima are open to negotiation with the host country by learning how to cook American dishes. Cooking becomes for these mothers a way to show their ability to negotiate and be a mediator between her motherland's traditions and the foreign land customs.

2.3 - Mother Tongue, Mother Country: Mothering in-between Languages

"To put him to sleep, she sings him
the Bengali songs her mother had sung to her."
(Lahiri, *The Namesake* 35)

"Gogol is one, grabbing, walking a little,
repeating words in two languages.
He calls his mother 'Ma,'
his father 'Baba'".
(Lahiri, *The Namesake* 40-41)

Language is part of the culture of a country and it is important not only as a way of communication, but also as part of an affiliation with a national cultural tradition. Acknowledging Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin's argument that "language and literature have both been called into the service of a profound and embracing nationalism" (2), it is possible to affirm that the use of one's language abroad is a way of affirming the

connection to the country of origin. In addition, language and culture are interrelated notions, as Agnew affirms: "language is embedded in cultural norms" ("Language Matters" 41). Thus, a way of preserving one's culture abroad is by preserving the language spoken.

The language of a country may be connected with the idea of nation as well as with the image of the mother, as conveyed by the term "mother tongue." Gayatri Spivak asks rhetorically: "when and how does the love of mother tongue, the love of my little corner of ground become the nation thing?" (13). It may be argued that the mother tongue is connected to the mother country and the memory of the mother. Regarding a child's mother tongue, Spivak contends that "every infant invents it and makes it the most private thing" (32). Furthermore, she explains that "the first learned language is so important [b]ecause it teaches every human infant to negotiate the public and the private" (32). Significantly, Spivak's understanding of the notion of mother tongue restates that the mother tongue is connected with the private space of home, and as a consequence, with the presence of the mother. Selina Mushi concludes that children of immigrants considered "their mothers and the home as being related to the mother tongue" (525). The definition of mother tongue encloses the language one learns first as a child in the domestic space as well as the language learned with the mother.

For the first generation of immigrants, language is a way to connect with their motherland, being "central to diasporic imagination" (Yang 154) and a "significant part of diasporic experience" (Katrak 6). However, Bengali becomes the second generation's mother tongue only in the sense that it is the tongue they learn and inherit from their parents. The second generation immigrants often learn both English and Bengali and as a consequence they speak a language "that is neither their mother tongue

nor standard English, but a concoction of their own making" (Braidotti 60). They are in-between not only worlds, but they are also "constantly in-between different languages" (Braidotti 30). For the second generation, the use of Bengali language is, as Braidotti points out, "retreated to the strict boundaries of the family" and it usually "[freezes] in time and stop[s] growing up" (34). In most stories, Bengali is used solely to communicate in the space of home with the mother and the father but the immigrant's children speak English fluently in the public space. As a consequence, English becomes the predominant language in all the other situations in the public sphere.

By learning a second or a third language, one becomes a nomad in the sense that there is a multiplicity of worlds and words in which to inhabit, as Braidotti affirms: the "polyglot is a linguistic nomad" (29). A fine example of this linguistic nomadism is Moushimi, Gogol's wife, who cannot write in Bengali, and barely remembers "how to write her own name, something her grandmother had once taught her" (261). Instead of clinging to Bengali, her matriarch's language, or to English, the language she learns at school, Moushumi learns French, a third language which conveys her desire to trespass language barriers. Her British accent as a child and her choice for French as the language she uses in her dissertation may represent an attempt to negate her Bengali culture. According to T. Vinoda, Moushumi "strikes out on a path that is decisively different from the Indian ways, as if in protest" (5). Indeed, Moushumi's choice of French may symbolize a transgression of boundaries, that is, her desire to trespass what is expected of her as a second generation Bengali by becoming a polyglot and expanding her linguistic horizons in this way. By choosing a third option, a third language, Moushumi attempts to find a third space.

Songs, letters and poetry are important aspects of national culture. During their meetings, the Bengali friends in *The Namesake* are always "speaking in Bengali, arguing, talking on top of one another, the sound of their laughter filling the already crowded rooms" (285-286). They sit in circles, "singing songs by Nazrul and Tagore, passing a thick yellow clothbound book of lyrics among them as Dilip Nandi plays the harmonium" (38). Ashima and Ashoke keep the habit of listening to "Bengali songs on the stereo" (60-61). Mrs. Sen, from the story "Mrs. Sen's," listens when the sun is setting to a tape "of something she called a raga" (128) which "sounded a little bit like someone plucking very slowly and then very quickly on a violin" (128). When she is homesick, she plays her farewell gift, a cassette tape on which she listens to her relatives reciting poetry and singing songs. Mrs. Sen treasures this tape because for her it is a way of reconnecting with her motherland, especially when she listens to her mother's voice, which, be it through overseas calls or tapes, is one of the most comforting memories for subjects in transit. On Mrs. Sen's tape, her mother's voice is recognizable for being quieter and more serious than the others, listing the events that took place in the country the day Mrs. Sen left India: "the price of goat rose two rupees. The mangoes at the market are not very sweet. College Street is flooded" (128). Mrs. Sen's memories of her mother and her childhood are often associated with both her mother's voice and the Bengali language and what was happening in India the day she left the country. When looking back at all the aspects of her life she has inherited from her mother, Mrs. Sen would probably list the Bengali language as one of her mother's legacies. In fact, languages and their expressions through music and poetry are one of the ways the diasporic Bengali community finds to reconnect themselves to their homeland.

Letters are essential for immigrants, especially mothers, because, as Carole Davies puts it, "writing home means communicating with home" (129). In other words, letters provide a connection with the motherland in the form of written language. Letters from home, written in Bengali by her mother are greatly treasured by Ashima in *The Namesake*, for instance. It is in a lost letter between Calcutta and Ashima's mailbox on Pemberton Road that her grandmother writes the chosen name for Gogol. In her first years abroad, Ashima sometimes cries after the mailman's visit when there are no letters from her mother and she spends her spare time writing letters to her. To avoid "being alone at home she sits in the reading room of the public library, in a cracked leather armchair, writing letters to her mother, or reading magazines or one of her Bengali books from home" (50). It is as if the act of writing were for her a way of adapting herself to the host country and keeping connections with her homeland as well. She tells her mother "of the powerful cooking gas that flares up at any time of day or night from four burners on the stove, and the hot tap water fierce enough to scald her skin, and the cold water safe enough to drink" (30). Ashima also treasures her mother's letters, which are "filled with every possible blessing and good wish, composed in an alphabet they have seen all around for most of their lives" (36). She rereads the letters when she feels homesick and the communication through letters work in a healing process for the diasporic mother, a way of feeling somehow linked to the past and her mother while dealing with the present and her role as mother. Through the letters written in Bengali language, Ashima keeps in touch not only with her mother, but also with her mother tongue and her motherland.

In Lahiri's *The Namesake* and "Only Goodness," language is also one of the ways used by the mother characters in order to teach their children about their

motherland's customs. These mothers usually speak in their mother tongue to their children and teach them Bengali nursery rhymes and Bengali poems, as the infant rapidly learns the new language and vocabulary. In "Only Goodness" Rudha, already an adult, has memorized the Bengali song her mother used to sing to her little brother. She remembers her mother coming at night to comfort her brother Rahul by "sitting in a rocking chair, singing a song in Bengali, something about a fishbone piercing the foot of a little boy, a song that would lull Sudha back to sleep also" (135). In a similar way, in *The Namesake* Ashima teaches her children to memorize poems by Tagore, "and the names of the deities adorning the ten-handed goddess Durga during pujo" (54). She takes them to Bengali classes, where they learn the Bengali alphabet and they are taught how to write their names in Bengali. She plays a crucial role in the teaching of Bengali songs to her children, as she is the one who sings "Bengali songs her mother had sung to her" (35) to put Gogol to sleep. In *The Namesake* and "Only Goodness" Bengali nursery rhymes and songs are a rich way for the mother to teach her children about Indian culture while demonstrating her maternal care towards them and creating a memory of her culture and heritage.

As soon as they start speaking, Ashima and Ashoke's children pronounce words in English and Bengali. When Gogol is one year old he is already "grabbing, walking a little, repeating words in two languages. He calls his mother 'Ma,' his father 'Baba'" (40). When Gogol is a toddler Ashima teaches him to say "'Dida' and 'Dadu' and 'Mamu,' to recognize his grandparents and his uncle from photographs" (45). When he learns how to draw, he gives his mother a picture of their family in which "underneath the figures he's written his own name, and Ma, and Baba" (61). Ashima remembers that her brother calls her *Didi*, his older sister, and that it is a term "he alone in the world is

entitled to use" (44) and when she is expecting Sonia, Gogol's sister, she tells him that Sonia will call him *Dada,* which means older brother. When Gogol and Sonia grow older Ashima always speaks to them in Bengali and teaches them familiar terms such as *mashi* and *pishi*, *mama* and *maima*, *kaku* and *jethu,* "to signify whether they are related on their mother's or father's side, by marriage or by blood" (81). Ashima teaches the Bengali terms to her children, and even when adults, they still refer to their parents as *Ma,* the Bengali word for mother, and as *Baba*, the Bengali word for father, referring to their siblings and relatives in Bengali terms as well.

Not only in *The Namesake*, but also in "Hema and Kaushik," "Only Goodness," "Nobody's Business," and *The Lowland,* traditional terms of respect and intimacy emphasize the importance of the ancestors and the family for the Indian culture. In "Hema and Kaushik," Chitra, Kaushik's stepmother, asks him to call her *mamoni* in an attempt to seek proximity with her stepson. In "Only Goodness" Rahul keeps on calling his older sister "Didi," even though they are both adults. Sang, in "Nobody's Business," speaks Bengali infrequently as an adult "never to her sister, never to her suitors, only a word here and there to her parents, in Michigan, to whom she spoke on weekends" (191). However, she is excited by the fact that she is going to be called Sang Mashi, explaining to her roommate that "*Mashi* was the Bengali word for 'Aunt'" (191). Even though she does not use Bengali for communication with her sister she knows that the Bengali term for aunt will be taught to her nephew. In *The Lowland,* Gauri reflects on the Bengali term her brother uses to refer to her, a term "reserved for bonds formed in childhood, never questioned, never subject to change" (318) which conveys "the intimacy of siblings but not of lovers" (318). Therefore, it is possible to affirm that Bengali terms are frequent among Lahiri's characters and that they show not

only respect among parents and elder brothers and sisters, which is a traditional aspect of Indian culture, but also intimacy and proximity among siblings.

Although the children learn and use the Indian terms to refer to each other and their relatives, they eventually communicate to each other in English. In *The Namesake*, "Hema and Kaushik," and "Unaccustomed Earth," as soon as they become teenagers, the immigrant's children reaffirm their North-American identity and speak English as their mother tongue, be it inside or outside the home. For instance, in *The Namesake* Gogol and Sonia end up speaking English between themselves like their American friends, sometimes even speaking to their parents in English instead of clinging to the Bengali language. Gogol is fluent in Bengali but he "cannot read or write in it with even modest proficiency" (118). When he travels to India his "American-accented English is a source of endless amusement to his relatives" (118). Ashoke and Ashima's 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). In the Bengali meetings, the parents talk "in the Bengali their children don't speak among themselves" (63), and they reply in English to their parents' Bengali questions. For example, in "Hema and Kaushik," Hema's mother speaks to Kaushik in Bengali, despite his "consistently English replies" (243). And in "Hell-Heaven" the daughter is "required to speak [Bengali] at home" (69) although she speaks "freely in English, a language in which, by that age, [she] expressed [herself] more easily than Bengali" (69). As time passes by, the immigrant's children are sent to English schools in order to learn English, but they speak Bengali to their mothers in the space of home. Ashima encourages Gogol to watch TV programs in English "in order to keep up with the English he uses at nursery school" (54) and weekly she takes him to story hour at the library, but in the

domestic realm she requires that her children speak Bengali. On Gogol's first day of school Ashoke guarantees his teacher that his "son is perfectly bilingual" (58) and for the first time he "addresses his son in careful, accented English" (58). The immigrant's children become bilingual, but Bengali is restricted to the communication with the mother and the father at home. It is a negotiation: they maintain the Bengali terms to address each other but they choose English for communication between themselves and their American friends in the public space.

In "Unaccustomed Earth," Bengali becomes the language which Ruma connects with their childhood. Ruma feels like a child when speaking Bengali because she does not master it and it is the language her mother used to communicate with her when she was a little girl. As an adult, Ruma restricts Bengali to the communication with relatives, but "she tripped over words, mangled tenses" (12), which conveys that she is not proficient in the Bengali language. In her position as the mother of an American boy, Ruma speaks to her son Akash in English because Bengali "had never been a language in which she felt like an adult. Her own Bengali was slipping from her" (12). As Carine Marques analyzes, Ruma seems "not to be able to maintain important traditions. She does not want to invite her father to live with her, she does not feel secure speaking Bengali and, therefore, will not teach it to her children" (56). Ruma somehow feels that she loses her authority when speaking to her son in Bengali. It is as if with the death of her mother, she does not feel connected to her mother tongue as before. In "Hema & Kaushik" Kaushik also connects the use of his mother tongue Bengali to the memory of his lost mother. He remembers his father used to write "Bengali poems on weekends and [to read] them aloud to [his] mother" (262) but assumes his father stopped writing "after [his] mother's death, as he'd stopped doing so

many things" (262). It is as if the connection with the Bengali tongue becomes fragile in the absence of the mother.

For Ruma, Bengali is a language she connects with her mother, a language "she had spoken exclusively in the first years of her life" (12). Therefore, Bengali becomes for her a reminder of her mother. Although Ruma never spoke English to her mother when she was alive, Ruma lacks "the discipline to stick to Bengali" (12) in her adulthood after her mother dies. She wonders how her mother would be helpful if she were alive and could sing songs "to Akash and [teach] him Bengali nursery rhymes" (6). She also wonders how it would be if her children could be rocked in her mother's arms, with the sound of her mother singing a melodic Bengali lullaby. However, Ruma herself does not speak nor sing in Bengali to her child. Ruma makes an effort to teach Bengali to her son Akash when he is little, by teaching him only a few words in Bengali. She remembers her mother had been "strict, so much so that Ruma had never spoken to her in English. But her father didn't mind" (12). Interestingly, Ruma remembers that it is her mother, not her father, who maintains the tradition of speaking Bengali in the space of home. However, it is her father who teaches her son Akash the numbers and colors in Bengali when he is a little boy, and Akash, being a fast learner, soon is able to recite the numbers in Bengali from one to ten and to say the colors *lal,* which means red, and *neel,* which means blue, while "pointing to the sky" (45). Since Ruma feels insecure teaching Bengali to Akash and in her own mother's absence, it is Ruma's father who feels responsible for teaching his grandson the Bengali language. The grandfather plays the role of the absent grandmother, teaching his grandson the traditions and the language his wife or his daughter were traditionally expected to maintain in the space of home.

As a consequence of the second generation not becoming proficient in their parents' mother tongue, in "Unaccustomed Earth" and *The Lowland*, Bengali sometimes becomes a secret code for communication among the first generation. In "Unaccustomed Earth" Ruma regrets not learning the language when she sees the postcard her father writes in Bengali to his new girlfriend. Ruma stares at "the Bengali letters her mother had once tried and failed to teach Ruma when she was a girl. They were sentences her mother would have absorbed in an instant" (59) and she wishes her mother were alive to decipher that secret code to her. She wonders "where had her mother gone, when life persisted, when Ruma still needed her to explain so many things?" (59), connecting the death of her mother to the loss of her mother tongue. By the same token, in *The Lowland*, when leaving her husband Subhash and her daughter Bela in order to move to California, Gauri writes a farewell letter in Bengali so that "there was no danger of Bela deciphering its contents" (212). Subhash conveys a version of the letter to Bela in English, in an attempt to reduce the impact of his wife's words on the girl. However, Bengali becomes for Bela a lost tongue, the language of her childhood, "a language she stopped hearing after her mother left" (256). She reflects that were her mother "ever to stand before her, even if Bela could choose any language on earth in which to speak, she would have nothing to say" (259). Bengali becomes, then, a language she connects with the loss of her mother. Bela's abandonment by her mother means the betrayal of her mother tongue, and she chooses English instead of the language that connects her to her mother.

As I have tried to show, Lahiri presents different possibilities of response to the mother tongue abroad. While some mother characters such as Ashima and Ruma's mother attempt to preserve the Bengali language in the private space of home, their

children stick to English for communication and do not become proficient in the Bengali language. There are also the second generation of mothers to whom Bengali is the language they connect with their own mothers, as it is the case with Ruma and Bela. Even when the second generation does not present a positive answer to the assimilation of the mother's culture, the mother's effort is noteworthy because she acts as a mediator and does not impose the Indian traditions on her children who were born in the USA, but rather, she often negotiates within the culture in which her children grow up.

It is more frequent to see mothers assuming the responsibility for constructing a sense of connection to the Indian culture in Lahiri's works, especially in the realm of the domestic space, although I acknowledge that male characters such as Ruma's father and Ashoke, Ashima's husband, also partake in the creation of an imaginary India inside their home in the USA. Interestingly, Lahiri also portrays mother characters who are not involved in maintaining their Indian traditions in the USA, or that do so in negotiation with the host country's customs. Therefore, this analysis shows that the works analyzed present different possibilities for motherhood in a foreign land, demonstrating that each experience is singular and unique.

CHAPTER THREE

Bonds Between Women

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Bonds Between Women

"Foi de mãe todo o meu tesouro
veio dela todo o meu ganho
mulher sapiência
do fogo tirava água
do pranto criava consolo."
(Conceição Evaristo, "De Mãe")

Women often search for relationships with other women in order to share experiences and find fellowship. The relationship with the mother is the first relationship a woman has and it contributes to the construction of the subjectivities of a daughter. As the epigraph to this chapter shows, a daughter usually recognizes the mother as the source of comfort in moments of sorrow and the provider of treasured wisdom. When the mother is absent because of geographical distance, as it happens with an immigrant mother; or when the absence of the mother happens because death has set mother and daughter apart, women seek nurturance and friendship in their sisters or other women companions.

In this chapter, I analyze how the mother and daughter relations are portrayed in a diasporic frame in Lahiri's narratives. In addition, I discuss how widowhood, death and loss influence the relations of the mother characters with their daughters and the connection with their motherland as well. Finally, in the last section I investigate how Lahiri's mother characters seek sisterhood with other immigrant women as a response to the solitude usually felt in their diasporic experience.

3.1 Daughters of America, Daughters of Mother India

"My mother and I had also made peace;
she had accepted the fact that I was not only her
daughter but a child of America as well."
(Lahiri, "Hell-Heaven" 81-82)

"She will miss living with her daughter, the surprising
companionship they have formed, going into Cambridge together
to see old movies at the Brattle, teaching her to cook the food
Sonia had complained of eating as a child."
(Lahiri, *The Namesake* 279)

Another important aspect of motherhood to be discussed is the mother-daughter relationships. Mother-daughter relations is a constant theme in women's writing, because, as Susan Friedman points out, a "reading of women writers in the context of a female literary tradition makes visible such patterns as mother-daughter relations" (*Mappings* 32). The relationship between a mother and her daughter is a theme that comes easily to women writers because it is part of women's experience. Rich explains that the experience of giving birth "stirs deep reverberations of her mother in a daughter; women often dream of their mothers during pregnancy and labor" (220). In this sense, the experience of becoming a mother brings a woman to a connection with her own mother and, consequently, with all mothers before her. Rich also points out the importance of mother and daughter relations, affirming that they "have always exchanged with each other beyond the verbally transmitted lore of female survival … the knowledge flowing between two alike bodies, one of which has spent nine months

inside the other" (220). In fact, the relationship with the mother is not only biological but also emotional, because the bonds between mother and children are formed since the womb.

As far as diasporic writing is concerned, the relationship between mothers and daughters is a way of maintaining the home culture abroad, as well as part of the negotiations with the host country. Especially in Lahiri's fictional texts mother-daughter bonds are relevant because they portray the connections between first and second generations of women immigrants. Catherine Rendón explains that in Lahiri's fiction there are the usual "intergenerational struggles of parents trying to keep their children in the fold of Bengali convention while at the same time negotiating the benefits of the possibilities offered by an American education" (68), implying that the relationship between parents and children in Lahiri's works involves negotiation not only between generations but also between different cultures. In this section I analyze the relationship between mothers and daughters in Lahiri's narratives in order to investigate whether and how mother-daughter relations are contextualized in a diasporic context in these texts.

A fine example of the relationship between mothers whose daughters are educated in the USA are Lahiri's stories "When Mr. Pirzada Came to Dine" and "Only Goodness." In "When Mr. Pirzada Came to Dine" Lilia's mother is proud of the fact that her daughter is born in the USA and that, as a consequence, she does not have to face the challenges her mother faced in her upbringing in India, as the narrator indicates: "I would never have to eat rationed food, or obey curfews, or watch riots from my rooftop, or hide neighbors in water tanks to prevent them from being shot, as she and my father had" (26-27). Lilia's mother believes that the simple fact of

being born in the USA would grant Lilia "a safe life, an easy life, a fine education, every opportunity" (26). This passage is full of meaning as it may refer to the American Dream. The same is true in relation to Sudha, the daughter in "Only Goodness" whose collection of "higher degrees framed and filling up her parents upstairs hall" (151) is a reason for her parents to be proud of her. Because of her degrees and the education she receives in the USA, she is considered a successful daughter. In both stories, the mothers see their daughters' education in the USA as something positive and are proud of their daughters' achievements in the host country.

Nevertheless, the relationship between mothers and daughters usually becomes a very complicated one when the daughters reach the age of puberty and adolescence. Mhatre points out that Lahiri writes "with thoughtfulness and awareness of the differences between second-generation immigrant families and their elders" (205). Vinoda explains that Lahiri's fiction "confronts the basic questions about identity in the second generation" (2), and that the second generation Indians strive to "blend, to fit in, and to assimilate. Their efforts at transformation can be first seen in their rejection of the ethnic ways, in the paths they take, and finally in their differently ordered relations" (3). Indeed, Lahiri's writing portrays very well the cultural clashes and generation gaps between mothers and daughters, as I shall discuss.

Another good example of the relations between mothers and daughters is the novel *The Namesake* in which Jhumpa Lahiri explores the conflicts between immigrant mothers and daughters born in the USA. Ashima and her daughter Sonia face intergenerational conflicts, often arguing violently, with the outcome of "Ashima crying, Sonia slamming doors" (107). Sonia makes adaptations in her dressing habits and in her appearance as the narrator describes:

> she doctors her jeans, cutting inches off the bottoms and inserting zippers at the newly narrowed ankles. One weekend, the washing machine is occupied because Sonia is in the process of dyeing the vast majority of her clothing black … Her braces have come off her teeth, revealing a confident, frequent, American smile. Her formerly shoulder-length hair has been chopped asymmetrically by one of her friends. Ashima lives in fear that Sonia will color a streak of it blond, as Sonia has threatened on more than one occasion to do, and that she will have additional holes pierced in her earlobes at the mall. (107)

Sonia's attitude can be seen as an attempt to fit in the American society to which she wants to belong. When she is born, they name her Sonali, but "at home they begin to call her Sonu, then Sona, and finally Sonia. Sonia makes her a citizen of the world" (62). Sonia's name is easily pronounced, it is "a Russian link to her brother, it's European, South American. Eventually it will be the name of the Indian prime minister's Italian wife" (62). Differently from her brother Gogol, whose name becomes a source of amusement to the others, Sonia's name is somehow universal and makes her feel accepted. Sonia goes to "the dances Gogol never went to himself" (107) and she believes that by dyeing her clothes black, instead of wearing colorful saris; and by chopping her hair and coloring it blond, instead of wearing it in a long braid, she will negate her Indian descendant and affirm her American subjectivity. Thus, besides the usual transformations which happen in adolescence, Sonia, like Gogol, also undergoes transformations in search of belonging to an American culture.

Similarly, in the short story "Hell-Heaven," which is told from the daughter's point of view, mother-daughter bonds become frail in the daughter's puberty years.

Pranab, Usha's adopted uncle, betrays Aparna's trust when he starts dating Deborah, an American girl, instead of choosing a woman of Indian descendant. When Usha elects Deborah to become her reference and her maternal figure, instead of her mother, the conflicts increase in the relationship between mother and daughter. Usha's preference for Deborah, together with the usual transformations occurring in adolescence, generates numerous arguments with her mother, as the narrator states: "in the middle of our arguments, [my mother] often conjured Deborah as her antithesis, the sort of woman she refused to be" (76). Despite her mother's resistance, Usha feels immediately drawn to Deborah, "the way young girls often fall in love with women who are not their mothers" (69). Her conversations with her mother about issues such as sexuality and menstruation are summarized in prohibitions concerning boys and explanations similar to the science lessons Usha has had in school. During her adolescence, Usha isolates her mother, "telling her that she was pathetic, that she knew nothing about [her], and it was clear that [she] had stopped needing her, definitively and abruptly" (76-77). It is as if by negating her mother's advice and rebelling against her, she is negating her Indian culture as well.

After marrying Pranab, whenever they meet, Deborah would make compliments to Usha on her beauty, saying she is "all grown up and so pretty … rekindling, if only for a minute, [their] bond of years before" (75). Deborah's compliments are of great effect to Usha because they come from an American woman, not from her mother. By the same token, in "Hema & Kaushik," Kaushik's mother is an important figure for Hema, because despite her mother's protests, she buys her her first three bras, and helps her try them on. Hema's mother views her daughter as just a girl, but Kaushik's mother compliments Hema on her potential of being very beautiful when she grows up,

"running her finger below the elastic, along [her] skin, adding, 'I hope you know that you're going to be very beautiful one day'" (239). Kaushik's mother becomes a link between Hema and Kaushik, and years after, when Kaushik and Hema become lovers and he tells her she is beautiful, Hema reminds him that "it was Kaushik's mother who had first paid her that compliment, in a fitting room shopping for bras. It was the first mention, between them, of his mother, and yet it did not cause them to grow awkward" (313). In both stories, the teenage daughters are complimented on their potential to be beautiful by women who are not their mothers, which have a great impact on the way they view themselves. These daughters are looking for assurance and acceptance from others in an attempt to belong to the American society.

The way the mothers deal with their appearance influences the construction of their daughters' femininity. When Hema is in the beginning of her adolescence, she compares her mother and Kaushik's mother and concludes that,

> apart from her bindi, my mother did not wear makeup, and I observed your mother's ritual with care, all the more impressed that she would go to such lengths when she was unwell and spending most of her day in bed. (243)

When Kaushik's mother sees her reflection in the mirror, after putting on her make-up, she looks at the mirror "intently, without evasion" (243), which portrays her as a woman who is not afraid of the reflection of her own body, even though she has breast cancer. While Hema's mother would wear only her bindi and Avon products, Kaushik's mother buys "at the makeup counter, a lipstick, a bottle of perfume, and an assortment of expensive creams that promised to firm her throat and brighten her eyes" (239). Hema's mother disapproves of Kaushik's mother behavior, remarking that she had

"become 'stylish,' a pejorative term in her vocabulary, implying a self-indulgence that she shunned" (236). However, for Kaushik's mother, her make up products are not superfluous items, they may be seen as a way of dealing with her decreasing health, to the point that Hema concludes that "with her bright lipstick and frosted eyelids, she looked less exhausted than my mother did" (232). Here both mothers are first generation Indian descendants but they have different approaches to cosmetics and appearance. Kaushik's mother buys cosmetics and wears make-up bought in the USA even when she is at home, whereas Hema's mother thinks it is unnecessary to be concerned with her appearance and only worries about maintaining the Indian tradition of wearing the bindi on her forehead to show that she is a married Indian.

Not only mother-daughter relations, but also grandmother and granddaughter relations are important in Lahiri's *The Namesake* and in "Hema and Kaushik." In *The Namesake* Ashima keeps her bonds with her mother and her grandmother despite the geographical distance that separates them. She suffers with the distance and is always planning to visit her parents during the upcoming holidays. Her relationship with her mother is different from the typical mother-daughter relations because Ashima is situated in a diasporic situation, learning to be a mother away from her own mother. In "Hema and Kaushik," Hema's golden bracelet, which is a gift from her grandmother she has worn since she is ten, can be considered a symbolic reminder of her grandmother's presence. The bracelet is "the only piece of jewelry she never bothered to remove" (312). This piece of jewelry is such an important token to Hema that she enlarges it when her wrist grows thick so that she can wear it as an adult too. When Hema and Kaushik, already adults, meet in Italy, she is surprised when "he hooked one of his fingers, lightly but possessively, around the gold bangle on her wrist, causing her

hand to shift slightly in his direction" (312) and remembers that she "wore this when [she was] a kid" (312). Thus, the bracelet reminds Hema of her grandmother and of the childhood years Kaushik spent in her home as a guest. However, Hema loses her grandmother's bracelet on a plane from Rome to India and she remembers she had "grown up hearing from her mother that losing gold was inauspicious" (324). Therefore, the loss of the bracelet may also symbolize that she is losing a part of herself when choosing not to marry Kaushik, as the narrator observes: "her right arm feeling foreign, missing the sound the bangle would have made coming into contact with the metal buckle … she felt she had left a piece of her body behind" (324). Hence, the loss of the gold bracelet conveys that her decision not to marry Kaushik is a sign of bad luck, as if she is negating her past and her roots, despite the fact that she is on the plane returning to India to marry an Indian man.

In "Hema & Kaushik" the mother mourns the loss of her daughter as if she were dead when she leaves home to get married and move to another continent. When Kaushik's mother returned home for holidays she brings great joy to his grandparents, "temporarily filling up and brightening the rooms … sipping tea from cups she'd known since she was a girl, sleeping in the room where she'd been small" (253). However, her death at the age of forty-two strikes his grandparents deeply, to the point that his grandmother cannot believe and accept the bad news, and she asks if Kaushik's mother was still in the taxi when they come to visit them. It is only when Kaushik affirms that his mother is not with them that both his grandparents mourn and grieve for the lost daughter, more painfully this time because they become aware that she is absent and will never return. It is as if the mother mourns firstly for her daughter when she is alive because she moves to the USA, and mourns the loss secondly when the daughter

eventually dies there.

In *The Namesake*, Sonia also returns to her roots when she becomes an adult. Sonia used to live with roommates, changing places often, and like her brother, sometimes referring to those places as home. Facing her daughter's nomadism, Ashima concludes she "has given birth to vagabonds" (167) because Sonia has "a new room every year ever since she was eighteen, new roommates Ashima must keep track of when she calls" (167). However, when Ashima becomes a widow, Sonia assumes the responsibility of cooking and driving her mother, and keeps company for Ashima during the season of widowhood. Ashima realizes she will miss the surprising "companionship they have formed, going into Cambridge together to see old movies at the Brattle" (279). When moving back to her mother's home, Sonia occupies the bedroom she used to have when she was a girl, which symbolizes that by returning home, Sonia is somehow returning to her mother's cultural background.

In "Unaccustomed Earth," becoming a mother is an experience that brings Ruma to a harmonious relationship with her own mother. Indeed, the experience of motherhood connects a woman with her women ancestors, because they share the same experiences in their bodies. During Ruma's second pregnancy, her mother is absent not because of geographical distance, but because death has set them apart. She reflects on the effects of the death of her mother on her life, feeling "closer to her mother in death than she had in life, an intimacy born simply of thinking of her so often, of missing her" (27). She wonders how her mother's presence would be helpful as it was when she was expecting her first baby. It is as if the memory of her mother's teachings still remains with her even after her mother's death, even though she does not transmit them to her children, as previously discussed.

It is possible to conclude that mother-daughter relations in Lahiri's works are different from the typical relationship between mothers and daughters. If, on the one hand, there is the Indian culture maintained by the Indian mothers who are first generation immigrants, on the other hand, there is the American culture represented by the daughters born in the USA, who are second generation of immigrants. The filial bonds between mothers and daughters in Lahiri's fiction involve not only the negotiation between different generations of women but also the negotiations between different cultures.

3.2 Immigrant Widow Mothers

"After the mourning period her in-laws
began to eat fish and meat again, but not Gauri.
She was given white saris to wear in place of colored ones,
so that she resembled the other widows in the family.
Women three times her age."
(Lahiri, *The Lowland* 109)

"She became a widow, as Gauri had become.
Bijoli now wears white saris, without a pattern or a border.
She's removed her bangles, and stopped eating fish.
Vermilion no longer marks the parting of her hair."
(Lahiri, *The Lowland* 182)

Widowhood seems to be a relevant theme in Lahiri's fiction. Actually, widowhood is a recurrent theme in all of Indian literary tradition according to Das, who

points out that it "was introduced in Indian literature by the Marathi writer Baba Padmanji in 1857, [and] continued to receive serious attention in the twentieth century which saw the most complicated problematization of the theme" (336). Das explains that the widow has a special place in Indian literature as a consequence of the importance of widows in Indian society, in which a widow is first enclosed and then "elevated to a super human level where she is no longer subject to the pleasures and pains of ordinary human existence but is transformed into a benign, sustaining archetypal mother" (Rajul Sogani qtd. in Das 336). Hence, given the importance of the figure of the widow, in this subchapter I analyze the representations of the Indian widow mother in Lahiri's works, and how the immigrant mothers experience widowhood in the host country.

Widowhood in *The Namesake* is part of the cycle of Ashima's life. Her life is marked by her moving to the USA, raising two children in the host country, learning to live alone when her children go to college and her husband moves to another city for professional reasons, and eventually becoming a widow. The novel opens with the scene of the childbirth pangs suffered by Ashima and closes focusing on her as if in a cycle, as Natalie Friedman points out: "the novel then returns to Ashima and ends with her widowhood and her plans to return to India, where she will spend part of each year in her retirement" (113). As far as Ashima's widowhood is concerned it is relevant to observe that her experience of widowhood in a way connects her to her mother, who also suffered the experience of losing a husband.

When traveling to Calcutta to visit her mother after her father's death, Ashima refuses "to picture what she shall see soon enough: her mother's vermilion erased from her part, her brother's thick hair shaved from his head in mourning" (47). She

remembers that, according to their tradition, the vermilion on her mother's head will be erased. The vermilion is a red powder worn by married women in India in order to signify they are married. It is like a wedding ring, and when their husbands die, they remove the vermilion from their heads. In the same way, when becoming a widow, Ashima shampoos the vermilion from her head. Gogol returns home to Cambridge, a return that may represent a return of Gogol to his roots, as he joins his sister in a mourning diet prepared by his mother, who is now a widow. Ashima takes off "her iron wedding bracelet, forcing it from her hand with cold cream, along with all the other bracelets she's always worn" (180). It pains Gogol when he sees his mother without the traditional adornments for the first time after his father's death. He learns that Ashima mourns for her husband "alone in her bed, unable to sleep, watching television without sound" (189) and that it is his sister Sonia who "drives his mother to weekend parties, and to Haymarket on Saturday mornings" (189), who cooks and keeps company to his mother. The description of Ashima's appearance also reveals how widowhood has devastated her:

> For a while she simply stands there before tending to the shampooing of her hair, the soaping of her softening, slightly shrinking fifty-three-year-old body, which she must fortify each morning with calcium pills. When she is finished, she wipes the steam off the bathroom mirror and studies her face. A widow's face. (278)

Ashima has become thinner, her vision is not the same as before and she wears bifocal glasses. Moreover, her hair turns gray and she wears it in a bun instead of a braid as she used to. For many years Ashoke is the reason why Ashima remains in the USA. Once he is absent she feels that her connections to the USA, instead of lessening, grow

stronger, as the narrator says: “Though his ashes have been scattered into the Ganges, it is here, in this house and in this town, that he will continue to dwell in her mind” (279). Thus, widowhood has a great impact on Ashima not only because it is the loss of her beloved husband but also because her husband is the reason why she has moved to the USA.

In “Unaccustomed Earth,” when Ruma’s grandmother becomes a widow in India, her father feels the responsibility of being one of the sons who should help his mother. However, he reflects that there is no question “of his moving the family back to India, and also no question of his eighty-year-old widowed mother moving to Pennsylvania. He had let his siblings look after her until she, too, eventually died” (29). Here the widow mother, Ruma’s grandmother, is deprived of the care of her son on the occasion of her widowhood because he lives overseas with his family. In his father’s absence, it would be the son’s responsibility to look after his mother, but Ruma’s father decides not to return to India, and not to ask his mother to move to the USA. Moving to the USA and living in the diasporic space would be a second loss to Ruma’s grandmother. Therefore Ruma’s father knows that, after losing her husband, her mother would not be strong enough to endure the loss of her motherland and decides not to ask her to move to the USA and live with them.

Similarly, in “The Third and Final Continent” and “A Temporary Matter” the sons feel responsible for looking after the mother in the season of widowhood. In “A Temporary Matter,” Shukhumar, together with his wife Shoba, joins his mother in the mourning ritual after his father’s death. Shukhumar hosts his mother in his house and she cooks for a week “something his father had liked” so they could “honor his father’s memory together” (17), observing the rituals of mourning as a traditional Indian widow.

In “The Third and Final Continent,” for the protagonist’s mother widowhood means a dead end because it drives her insane. After her husband dies she refuses to “adjust to life without him” as the protagonist narrates:

> My mother … sank deeper into the world of darkness from which neither I, nor my brother, nor concerned relatives, nor psychiatric clinics on Rash Behari Avenue could save her. What pained me most was to see her unguarded, to hear her burp after meals or expel gas in front of company without the slightest embarrassment ... And so it was my job to sit by my mother’s feet and study for my exams as she counted and recounted the bracelets on her arm as if they were beads of an abacus. We tried to keep an eye on her. Once she had wandered half naked to the tram depot before we were able to bring her inside again. (187)

When his mother eventually dies, he moves to the USA. Probably he decides to move to the USA after his mother dies, so that she would not have to face a second loss, losing her son after losing her husband. In the USA he meets Mrs. Croft, the elder lady who hosts him in the USA, and remembers his mother’s state during the season of widowhood, comparing it to the effects widowhood has on Mrs. Croft. For Mrs. Croft widowhood is an important event, but she manages to carry on with her life, as her daughter Helen remembers: “She used to give [piano] lessons. For forty years. It was how she raised us after my father died” (187). Thus, Lahiri presents in her writing different ways of dealing with widowhood. It can lead to a mild mourning state, as it happens with the protagonist’s mother, or it can lead to a new beginning in life, as it happens with Mrs. Croft.

Chitra, from the story "Hema & Kaushik" enterprisingly also seeks a new beginning for her life after becoming a widow. She moves to another continent with her two young daughters, remarries, and starts a new life in the USA. When Chitra becomes a widow, she probably erases the vermilion on her head, a typical practice of widows, but when she remarries she starts wearing the vermilion again, in order to be recognized in public spaces as a married woman. Chitra is portrayed as a traditional Indian woman, who wears vermilion in her hair, which is a traditional practice for Indian women. Kaushik describes the "powdery red stain [as] the strongest element of her appearance" (260) in contrast to his own mother who had shunned the traditional practice of wearing the color. According to Reshmi Dutt-Ballerstadt, Kaushik's father's remarriage "not only becomes a visible reminder of his late mother's absence from his own life, but also begins to act as a gesture of a second mourning for his own mother" (163). Chitra is aware of the role she plays in Kaushik's life, acting as a stepmother for him. She asks him to call her *mamoni*, which means stepmother in Bengali, even though she knows that perhaps he will not fully accept the idea of being her stepson, and he makes it clear that he does not want her to be a substitute to his mother. After facing her first husband's death, Chitra overcomes widowhood and moves to America with Kaushik's father, who is a widower as well. It seems that Chitra has to deal with two losses, firstly the loss of her first husband; secondly, the loss of her motherland, when she starts a diasporic life in the USA, living there but remembering and keeping the traditions from India.

In *The Lowland*, the widow Bijoli observes the rituals and practices of widowhood as the narrative observes: "Bijoli now wears white saris, without a pattern or a border. She's removed her bangles, and stopped eating fish. Vermilion no longer

marks the parting of her hair" (182). When Bela, her granddaughter, meets Bijoli for the first time she observes how widowhood has defeated her grandmother, because her sari "is stained and her bones have turned soft, her teeth no longer firm in her gums [and] she has forgotten how old she is" (189). Bijoli's life becomes a succession of losses. First, her son Subhash moves to the USA, then her son Udayan is killed, afterwards her son departs to the USA again with her granddaughter and her daughter in-law. When eventually she becomes a widow, her life seems unbearable and Bijoli spends her last days mourning her losses until the day she herself dies.

By the same token, Gauri, who becomes a widow when she is still a young woman, also observes the practices of Indian widows. Gauri does not eat fish and she is given "white saris to wear in place of colored ones, so that she resembled the other widows in the family. Women three times her age" (109). However, Gauri's widowhood lasts only a few months because she marries her brother in-law and moves to the USA pregnant of Udayan, her first husband. Gauri's remarriage turns out to be a positive experience because it is her opportunity to leave her in-laws house where she is ignored and badly-treated and to start a new beginning in the USA, as discussed in chapter one.

We can conclude that mother characters in Lahiri's works deal with widowhood in different ways. In the one hand, widowhood can be a devastating experience for women, leading them to isolation and solitude. On the other hand, it can also be the start of new routes in life, leading them to new challenges and new hopes when they marry again or search sisterhood with other women, as it will be discussed in next section.

3.3 Solitude and Sisterhood: Solitary Diasporic Mothers

"Those differences were irrelevant in Cambridge,
where they were both equally alone."
(Lahiri, "Hema & Kaushik" 225)

"No one better than the foreigner
knows the passion for solitude."
(Kristeva 12)

The decision to move to a foreign land implies adaptation to new cultures and new people. As a consequence, foreigners may feel solitary in their search for new connections and new friendships. Kristeva points out that no one "better than the foreigner knows the passion for solitude" (12) and that the foreigner is "a devotee of solitude, even in the midst of a crowd" (5). Indeed, solitude is a condition intrinsically related to the foreigner. However, Kristeva also affirms that, despite their nostalgia, the foreigner "wishes to be alone but with partners" (12), which implies that the foreigner seeks a community to which belong, even if this community is made of other solitary foreigners. Thus, the decision of joining a group of other solitary foreigners can be seen as a response to their solitary condition.

For women who are simultaneously foreigners and mothers, solitude becomes even harder. Rich explains that instead "of giving birth and raising children near her mother or other women relatives, the frontier mother had no one close to her with whom to share her womanly experiences" (234). This happens so because they leave "networks of friends, mothers, and sisters far behind" (Rich 234) and fight "a peculiarly female battle with loneliness" (Rich 234) in the foreign land. Rich also claims that

motherhood is an ambivalent situation for immigrant women, because, if it offers the chance "to break out of more traditional roles, it also, ironically, deprived many of the emotional support and intimacy of a female community; it tore them from their mothers" (234). In search of community to belong to, diasporic immigrant mothers get together to share their womanly experiences abroad. Sisterhood is women's response to solitude, a positive and helpful way of adapting themselves to the new surroundings. In this section I analyze how Lahiri's mother characters seek sisterhood among other foreign women and how relationships with other women help them to deal with solitude in a foreign land.

Although in Lahiri's "The Treatment of Bibi Haldar" the character Bibi Haldar is not necessarily an example of a diasporic mother, this story is a fine example of sisterhood and the power of a community of women. Bibi Haldar's mother dies during childbirth and her father, a Maths teacher, tries unsuccessfully to discover the reason why Bibi has frequent attacks. After her father's death she lives with relatives who isolate her. Bibi is a single woman but she has the desire to get married and become a mother, and she laments her fate publicly, as the other women "hung [their] laundry or scrubbed scales from [their] fish" (159-160). Bibi is solitary because she is an orphan, and she thinks she does not fit in society because she is single and she is not pretty, as the narrator describes:

> She was not pretty. Her upper lip was thin, her teeth too small. Her gums protruded when she spoke. "I ask you, is it fair for a girl to sit out her years, pass neglected through her prime, listing labels and prices without promise of a future?" Her voice was louder than necessary, as if she was speaking to a deaf person. "Is it wrong to envy you, all brides and

> mothers, busy with lives and cares? Wrong to want to shade my eyes, scent my hair? To raise a child and teach him sweet from sour, good from bad?" (160)

Solitude is part of Bibi's life and eventually, when Bibi Haldar is found mysteriously pregnant and nobody discovers who the baby's father is, she is excluded from her family and starts living in the basement.

In this story the narrative construction is important as it uses a first person narrator along with the pronoun "we" which conveys that the tale is told from the perspective of a community of women: "we helped her deliver a son … and we showed her how to feed him, and lull him to sleep. We bought her an oilcloth and helped her stitch clothes and pillowcases out of the fabric she had saved over the years" (172). Sisterhood helps Bibi to start a new beginning in her life. Noelle Brada-Williams portrays Bibi Haldar's pregnancy in the following terms:

> This pregnancy leads to an amazing transformation in which she is almost miraculously healed and becomes a capable, self-supporting businesswoman who now takes great care not only of her business but, as newly trained by the community of women around her, of her son as well. (461)

In the absence of her relatives, of a husband or of her parents, it is the community of women who provides her with food and water and who helps her raise a child. This same community encourages Bibi Haldar to restart her business, buys her products and teaches Bibi how to look after her baby boy. In "The Treatment of Bibi Haldar" motherhood comes not only as empowerment but also as redemption for the protagonist who is cured of her attacks after becoming pregnant. Indeed, Bibi Haldar's pregnancy

breaks with a traditional paradigm, as she is a single mother and as the identity of the father of her son is a mystery for the community. This short story emphasizes the empowerment provided by motherhood, how women can be single mothers moving forward with their lives without men around them. Besides, it conveys how sisterhood is powerful, because it is the community of women who help each other in order to achieve a common goal: the well-being of a group of women.

The importance of a community of women is also expressed in the short story "Mrs. Sen's." Mrs. Sen is one of Lahiri's women characters who moves to North America in order to accompany her husband who is an academic professor. According to Susan Moyniham, Mrs. Sen is "trapped by the isolating and sterile university housing offered to them, where she remains home much of the day, particularly because she despises driving and is reluctant to learn" (104). Mrs. Sen shares the solitude it brings with Eliot, the boy to whom she is a baby-sitter, as the narrator observes:

> "You must miss her. When I think of you, only a boy, separated from your mother for so much of the day, I am ashamed." "I see her at night." "When I was your age I was without knowing that one day I would be so far. You are wiser than that, Eliot. You already taste the way things must be." (123)

Here Mrs. Sen compares American society with Indian society. She thinks that Eliot is only a boy and he already experiences the solitude of being apart his mother during the whole day. In fact, as a response to her solitude, Mrs. Sen finds communion not with other women, but by spending time with the boy Eliot, who also leads a solitary life together with his single mother. Mrs. Sen compares Eliot's condition to her own childhood, when she grew up surrounded by her mother and the community of women

around them.

Memory can also be a way of dealing with solitude. Memory plays an interesting role in Mrs. Sen's diasporic situation because she remembers that in India, women are surrounded by other women who provide companionship and help in times of need: "just raise your voice a bit, or express grief or joy of any kind, and one whole neighborhood and half of another has come to share the news, to help with arrangements" (116). Mrs. Sen remembers the community she left in her motherland together with the memories of her own mother. Besides, Mrs. Sen also remembers how women in her community back home would get together to chop vegetables for a special occasion such as a wedding. Mrs. Sen remembers the chat and talking of her mother and the neighbors and she tells Eliot that whenever there is a special occasion, her mother:

> [would send] out word in the evening for all the neighborhood women to bring blades just like this one, and then they sit in an enormous circle on the roof of [their] building, laughing and gossiping and slicing fifty kilos of vegetables through the night. (115)

In her diasporic situation, Mrs. Sen can only chop vegetables but she does not have a group of fellow women around her to whom to talk. Mrs. Sen is a diasporic subject who compares the sound of chat and joy from her motherland to the silence and solitude she feels in her new life in America. Thus, such solitude reflects the displacement Mrs. Sen feels as a diasporic woman in a foreign land and she wishes for a community of women to belong to in the USA.

Similarly, Boori Ma, in Lahiri's "A Real Durwan" is the example of an immigrant woman who deals with solitude through memory, by telling stories of her

past. She is separated from her four daughters and her husband by a political event, the partition, and she works in Calcutta as a durwan, a woman who is a maid in a residential building. Anh Hua affirms that "memory is the construction or reconstruction of what actually happened in the past" (198). Memory plays a relevant role in the narrative as Boori Ma narrates her sorrows "twice a day as she [sweeps] the stairwell, the details of her plight and losses suffered since her deportation to Calcutta after Partition" (70). Although past memories can bring pain to Boori Ma, who affirms that her "life is composed of such griefs you cannot even dream them" (72), she tells not only of her hardships but also of the good times of her life as well, being her memory and her story-telling ways of healing for her. Through memory Boori Ma builds her future and shapes the way she sees her present life. Boori Ma's storytelling is a way of remembering, memory is for the immigrant mother a useful tool to connect her to her imaginary homeland. Her listeners usually do not believe her stories, taking her narratives as myths or imaginary tales. However, she seems not to care about other's opinions and she remembers the experiences she lived when she was in her motherland. It is possible to affirm that Boori Ma responds to her solitude as a diasporic woman mother by attaching herself to her memories of the past in order to survive in the foreign present.

Ruma from "Unaccustomed Earth" resembles Mrs. Sen and Boori Ma in that she experiences solitude as well, even though being born in the USA. When living in Brooklyn, Ruma goes to prenatal yoga lessons and joins a mommy group after her baby Akash is born. In these groups she meets women who become her surrogate family in the USA, women who "had known the everyday details of her life. They'd kept her company when she went into labor, handed down the clothes and blankets their children

had outgrown" (34-35). Ruma finds in these groups of women the help she needs to learn how to look after her newborn baby and the strength to deal with the unexpected death of her mother. In this sense, sisterhood and communion with other women mothers help Ruma deal with the solitude of being an orphan, an Indian descendant in the USA, and the mother of a young child.

However, Ruma moves to Seattle with her husband and three-year-old child. There she becomes solitary, failing to keep in touch with the friends she used to have in the previous neighborhood they lived, Brooklyn. Despite all the time she spent with the other mothers at the mommy group in New York, "the roots did not go deep, and these days, after reading their e-mails, Ruma was seldom inspired to write back" (35). Similarly, in Seattle she feels "no connection to any of it, or to anyone" (34), as the narrator states:

> she had exchanged only pleasantries with her neighbors—a retired husband and wife on one side, two gay professors at the University of Washington on the other. There were some women she would talk to as she sat watching Akash in the swimming pool, but at the end of each class they never suggested getting together. (34)

It is as if Ruma feels she belongs nowhere, her mother's death has reduced her contacts with Indian culture, and she lacks the strength to make connections with the other American mothers around her. In fact, Ruma feels lonely because she cannot find a community of women around her in Seattle and she "has less energy to create new networks, new friendships. She does not know her neighbors, and has not made friends with other mothers" (Hai 198). For her, "it felt unnatural to have to reach out to strangers at this point in her life" (34) and she becomes lonely and isolated, feelings

that are heightened by her foreignness.

In her second pregnancy, Ruma's husband's new job with a high salary is an excuse for Ruma to leave her part time job as a lawyer and to dedicate herself entirely to her children. Lavina Dhingra describes Ruma as a woman who is internally "conflicted and alienated regarding her cultural investment as a Bengali daughter and mother and her disregarded ambition as a lawyer turned stuck-at-home, frustrated, exhausted wife, and pregnant mother" (141). When her husband and her father suggest that she hire a babysitter and return to her work as a lawyer, she justifies herself saying that she knows no one in Seattle and that the "prospect of finding someone to care for her child in a strange place seemed more daunting than looking after him on her own … [and] in September, Akash would start at a preschool" (5). Ruma makes of her house her workplace, "leafing through the piles of catalogues that came in the mail, marking them with Post-its, ordering sheets covered with dragons for Akash's room" (6). Her decision not to work, not to keep in touch with her friends from Brooklyn and simultaneously not to make new friends in Seattle seems to be Ruma's reaction to her mother's death in the form of isolation and solitude. Ruma can be seen as a solitary diasporic mother, whose mother's death heightens her solitude in the USA.

Not only Ruma, but also Gauri, from *The Lowland*, is resistant to new friendships. In an episode when Gauri and her husband Subhash are invited to a meeting with other Bengalis, Subhash is relieved to see Gauri talking to the other Bengali wives, some "of the women putting their hands on her belly. He heard them talking about children, about recipes, about organizing a Diwali festival on campus the following year" (139). Subhash is satisfied because he believes that sisterhood with other Bengali women will help Gauri get used to the new life in the USA. However,

Gauri refuses to keep in touch with the other women, as the narrative voice conveys:

> "The women seemed friendly. Who were they?" "I don't remember the names, she said." The enthusiasm she'd mustered in the company of others had been discarded. She seemed tired, perhaps annoyed … "Should we invite a few of them to our place, sometime?" "It's up to you." "They might be helpful, after the baby comes." "I don't need their advice." "I meant as companions." "I don't want to spend my time with them." (140)

Gauri refuses to blend in, to mix with the other Bengali women around her. She justifies that she has "nothing in common with them" (140), and therefore she does not want to belong to their community. In the case of Indian women, their country of origin is what they have in common. If they are mothers, motherhood binds them together even more. Nevertheless, Gauri decides not to seek sisterhood. She prefers spending hours in her office or at the library instead of meeting other women who share a common origin with her. She chooses the solitude of motherhood in a foreign land and the solitude of academic life instead. When moving to the USA, Gauri does not want to become a nostalgic diasporic mother like the other Indian women she meets in the USA. She does not want to mingle with the other immigrant women, but instead she wants to be accepted and to belong to the American society.

As I have been arguing, solitude is a state that permeates the lives of Lahiri's characters. This is true especially in relation to the mothers in the novel *The Namesake* and in the stories "Only Goodness" and "Hell-Heaven." The mothers portrayed in these stories are diasporic mothers who, upon their moving to America in order to accompany their husbands, leave behind their families and motherland, India. During their

children's infancy, they dedicate themselves to their families, sometimes even forgetting to look after themselves.

In "Only Goodness," Sudha's mother puts on weight after her second child is born and she chooses not to work and not to drive, becoming dependent on her husband and her children. She becomes stuck, "aware that they faced a life sentence of being foreign" (138), even though in London she had been working "toward a certificate in Montessori education" (138). If in London she still studies, in the USA she has no motivation to adapt to the host country, as if her state as immigrant mother is a temporary matter. She feels as if she does not fit into the American society, deciding solely to look after her children. Sudha, her daughter, thinks that her mother's separation from India as "an ailment that ebbed and flowed like a cancer" (138). By the same token, in "Hell-Heaven" Aparna leads a solitary life in America as an immigrant mother, as the narrator tells:

> She had never worked, and during the day she watched soap operas to pass the time. Her only job, every day, was to clean and cook for my father and me. We rarely went to restaurants, my father always pointing out, even in cheap ones, how expensive they were compared with eating at home. When my mother complained to him about how much she hated life in the suburbs and how lonely she felt, he said nothing to placate her. "If you are so unhappy, go back to Calcutta," he would offer, making it clear that their separation would not affect him one way or the other. (76)

Aparna's husband points the return to Calcutta as the solution to her solitude. However, as the years in the USA go by, her relationship with her husband is renewed, as the daughter states: "as my parents approached their old age, she and my father had grown

fond of each other, out of habit if nothing else" (81). She notices "a warmth between [her] parents that had not been there before, a quiet teasing, a solidarity, a concern when one of them fell ill" (81). Eventually, Aparna decides, "when she turned fifty, to get a degree in library science at a nearby university" (81). Aparna finds in sisterhood with other Bengali women (68) the strength to endure the hardships of motherhood in a foreign land and decides to remain in the USA later on.

In *The Namesake*, upon Ashima's husband's moving to another city, she begins to live on her own and learns how to live alone, by herself. As Ramlal Agarwal points out, she learns "to live alone whenever her husband is away on his teaching assignments and her children are away pursuing their studies in different states" (94). Ashima's children grow up and move to another city in order to study. Now adults, they do not demand the same maternal care they used to when they were kids and "at forty-eight she has come to experience the solitude that her husband and son and daughter already know, and which they claim not to mind" (161). Ashima's children tell her that "everyone should live on their own at some point … but Ashima feels too old to learn such a skill. She hates returning in the evenings to a dark, empty house, going to sleep on one side of the bed and waking up on another" (161). So far, she has never been alone. When a teenager, she sleeps in her parents' bed. When married she sleeps with her husband Ashoke, but now that he has moved to another city for professional reasons, her books occupy the place in bed he used to occupy. When Gogol is a little school boy, she is "despondent, unaccustomed, all over again, to being on her own" (50) during the time he is at school. She avoids being alone at home and goes to the public library in order to pass the time. When she finds herself alone because her children and her husband are in another state, she returns to the library, this time to

work there as part-time job. Ashima has learned to live her life for others, first her parents, then her husband and eventually her children. It is only when she finds herself without someone to look after does she decide, to find an activity to occupy her time and to entertain herself.

Ashima's decision to work part-time in a library is a great achievement. It is her "first job in America, the first since before she was married" (162). There she occupies herself with her job, "shelving the books that people returned … greeting the regular patrons by name as they walk through the doors" (162). In her work at the library Ashima makes new friends and starts her independence as an American citizen, even though she is still dependent on her husband to withdraw her paychecks. Working at the library, Ashima meets new American friends, creating a community of American women around her which provides an openness to friendship with American born women:

> she is friendly with the other women who work at the library, most of them also with grown children. A number of them live alone, as Ashima does now, because they are divorced. They are the first American friends she has made in her life. (162)

Besides her American friends, Ashima prides herself on each Bengali friend with whom she "has had the fortune to share rice with in a foreign land" (159-160) and they become "a surrogate family and a microcosm of the India that was left behind" (Alfonso-Forero 158). Sisterhood and communion between scattered subjects in diasporic spaces are relevant because the ties are usually established through the sharing of Indian culture and customs. Ashima's friends are newly arrived wives from India, and they turn to her for recipes and advice. She manages to create around herself

a diasporic community of other Bengali women and mothers. She welcomes the new homesick Bengali wives, and when preparing Christmas celebrations she "collect[s] them together, organize[s] the holiday, convert[s] it, introduce[s] the tradition to those who are new" (286). They get together for celebrations, to share experiences, and to create in the USA a small, imaginary India.

In this sense, Ashima is different from Aparna and Gauri because she has the ability to be mobile in-between cultures, which is represented by the ties she keeps with her Bengali women friends while simultaneously building up friendships with the community of North American women around her when she starts working at a library. Instead of looking back and regretting the years she spent in the USA, she looks back and recognizes that if "for thirty-three years she missed her life in India, [now] she will miss her job at the library, the women with whom she's worked. She will miss throwing parties" (279). Together with the sisterhood this community of women provides her, Ashima gets to know the American way, learning that her grown-up children won't return home faithfully for the holidays and that she cannot control their relationships, but has to accept her children's choices.

Although Ashima and Aparna are concerned only with their children and husbands during their first years in the host land, once their children become adults, they start to reevaluate their lives. Lahiri's mother characters in "Hell-Heaven" and *The Namesake* seek new beginnings, especially by furthering their education or starting a new job or activity when their children grow older and leave home, instead of lamenting their empty nests. Aparna and Ashima's decision to join a community of Bengali women around them can be seen as an attempt to remain connected to India,

reproducing India in a USA context. Thus, sisterhood is the way they find to confront solitude.

It is evident the importance of relationships for immigrant women characters in Lahiri's fictional texts. Whereas filial bonds between mothers and daughters provide the preservation of the Indian culture along generations of women, sisterhood is important as well. As I tried to show, sisterhood and fellowship from other women help some of the women characters to adjust to their lives in the host country and to deal with the losses they have to endure. Besides, sisterhood helps them when they get together to learn from each other and to share their womanly experiences in the foreign land. However, Lahiri also portrays mothers such as Ruma and Gauri who do not seek sisterhood, but instead learn to deal with solitude in their own ways.

FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

The mother characters analyzed in this thesis present different approaches to maternity. It has been argued that motherhood shapes the way the mother characters in Lahiri's texts deal with their children and the cultural shifts when they move to the USA. Some of them see motherhood as a positive experience as it happens with Ashima and Bela. Others see motherhood as a negative experience and do not fulfill their children's expectations as mothers, as portrayed in *The Lowland* and "Interpreter of Maladies." While mother characters such as Chitra and Ashima are diasporic subjects in search of a home, there are also other mothers who have different approaches to the host country, as it happens with Gauri's and Kaushik's mothers.

It is interesting to observe that Lahiri does not present the return to the homeland India as an option to her mother characters. Ashima, for instance, chooses, instead of a definite return, a temporary return to India, deciding that she will be back to the USA each six months. Her decision to live in transit shows that after dwelling between these two worlds she eventually discovers that home is not a limited and fixed place. She feels that India, which once was home, now is somehow foreign and that the United States, which for so long was a foreign place, is somehow like home as well. As a consequence, she, who has been displaced between the USA and India not knowing where to belong and where to call home, eventually learns how to be, in Bhabha's terms, "unhomed [but] not homeless" (9). She learns how to be without a fixed place to call home. However, instead of feeling homeless, Ashima develops the ability to have multiple homes.

When Ashima realizes that her house in Boston is the place where she constructed her life in union with her husband, then it becomes home as well. When she

leaves her host country, after becoming a widow, she affirms that she is going to miss it because there she has not only grown to know and love her husband, but also she has grown from the experience of leaving behind her relatives and family in India by following him in the land with freezing winters. Motherhood plays a crucial role in Ashima's maturing as a woman character and her development is a result of her experience of motherhood in a foreign land, having learnt to have two places of belonging.

After living in-between the USA and India, she chooses a life in transit. By making this choice, Ashima assumes her transnational identity. It is possible to say that the character portrayed in the first chapters of the novel is eventually transformed into the woman who "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" (276). She is not afraid to make the journey to India alone, by herself. Returning to India, she will live with her brother's family, but there she will have a room of her own, as the narrator states:

> In Calcutta, Ashima will live with her younger brother, Rana, his wife, and their two grown, as yet unmarried daughters, in a spacious flat in Salt Lake. There she will have a room, the first in her life intended for her exclusive use. (275)

Ashima will have a room of her own in India and will be able to take over her life. Gogol is overwhelmed by his mother's widowhood and her departure: "the givers and keepers of Gogol's name are far from him now. One dead. Another, a widow, on the verge of a different sort of departure, in order to dwell, as his father does, in a separate world" (289). Indeed, Ashima's decision to spend six months of her life in India and six

months in the USA, is a "solitary, somewhat premature version of the future she and her husband had planned when he was alive" (275). When returning to America, each six months, she will visit not only her children, and perhaps her grandchildren, but also the community of women friends she built there. The reason why Ashima wants to return each six months is to see her children, her friends, and her grandchildren, who are not born yet. She expects to arrive "in America laden with hand-knit sweaters and gifts, leaving, a month or two later, inconsolable, in tears" (278). She sees herself being a foreign mother and a foreign grandmother as well. It is interesting to observe that Ashima, more than any of the mother characters in Lahiri's fiction, is placed in an in-between space. Ashima chooses a life without borders, as her own name signifies, which fosters a discussion on the relevance of borders for this character. It is possible to speak of Ashima as a woman character who trespasses borders and questions the fixity of boundaries when, after becoming a widow, she chooses a life of transit, in flux. She will belong to both places, but she will belong nowhere at the same time, she will be a cosmopolitan traveler.

As far as relationships are concerned, some women mother characters join a group of other diasporic women, as it is the case with Ashima and Chitra. Others choose not to create bonds with people of common origin, as it happens with Gauri and Ruma. Their solitude may be seen as a reaction to their situation as foreign mothers of Indian descendant in the USA.

Regarding *The Namesake*, "Only Goodness" and "Hell-Heaven," it can be said that after teaching their daughters the customs of their motherlands, the mothers start accepting that their daughters are Indian descendants but, being raised in the USA, they are influenced and shaped by the host country's culture as well. Therefore, they still

express their concern for their daughters' well-being, but they do so by keeping a distance so that their daughters can be independent to make their own choices in life. They accept that their daughters date and marry American men and understand that, being born in the USA, their daughters are Indian descendants but also have influences from the host country's culture.

Similarly to Ashima, in *The Lowland* Gauri returns to India with the Indian passport she "continued to carry, the citizenship she'd never renounced, [which] enabled her, the following morning, to board another plane" (316), but she does so in her position as a professor from a university in California. There she meets her brother's family and she remembers her youth years when she sees a young girl, "a version of herself, standing on one of the crowded busses, hanging on to a strap, wearing one of the cotton saris she'd worn to college" (318). Gauri revisits the places she used to go when she was a young student but she does so not looking for a definite return, but in a temporary visit to her past, to the landscapes that were part of her life. When she returns to the USA, she receives a letter from her daughter saying that she is willing to facilitate a reconnection with her granddaughter. It seems that, in the same way that India represents the motherland and the presence of the mother, the host country represents their Indian descendants born there, their grandchildren who inherit this ability to be in-between cultures. Thus, a reconnection with the USA means to Gauri and Ashima a connection to their descendants.

Whereas some of Lahiri's mother characters are portrayed as mediators in-between two different cultures, as it is Ashima's case, others blend in in the host country and assume a different identity, able to adapt and easily assimilate the host country's customs. Ruma and Gauri are not concerned with the preservation of the

Indian culture abroad and as a consequence their children will only learn about their Indian background with their grandparents. For the second generation the grandmother exists only in the memories and stories told by their mothers, the first generation of immigrants. Similarly, the motherland India only exists for the second generation as the birthplace of their parents, a place where they go for vacations. As a consequence of this distancing by the second generation, the role of the Indian mother abroad is to preserve the memory of both her motherland and her female ancestors. The second generation children do not feel closely connected to India and their customs in the same way their parents do, even though those traditions are greatly treasured by the first generation.

It is possible to affirm that this investigation shows that the works analyzed present different alternatives for motherhood in a foreign land, showing that each experience is peculiar and thus unparalleled. By being mothers and foreigners, Lahiri's characters usually experience motherhood in a challenging way. However, each story offers a different approach and a different possibility to how the mother characters deal with their children and the host country's culture, very often trying to adjust or negotiate life in a foreign land.

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