



Lapis Lazuli

An International Literary Journal (LLILJ)

Vol.4 / NO.2/Autumn 2014

In Search of a Room of One's Own: The Home as a Seat of Longing and
Desire in Diaspora.

Baidehi Mukherjee

Abstract

The paper seeks to unfold the concept of 'home' in diaspora as a space which, though is conventionally grounded in the immigrant's nostalgic psyche, is profound in ambiguity. It is a seat of the expatriate's counter-gaze, thus being exposed to acculturation in an alien land. The homeland exists in the immigrant's recollection of it as a lost territory, capable of several possibilities in the event of diaspora. Gaston Bachelard in *The Poetics of Space* (1958) lays special emphasis on the interior domestic space. The house for Bachelard, is the quintessential phenomenological

Lapis Lazuli -An International Literary Journal (LLILJ) ISSN 2249-4529

Vol.4/ NO.2/Autumn 2014

URL of the Journal- <http://pintersociety.com/>

URL of the Issue: <http://pintersociety.com/vol-4-no-2autumn-2014/>

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object, where the deep-seated relation with the inhabitant is always present. Diaspora has multiple social, economic, political and cultural reasons behind it. The paper is a study on some texts by a few Indian diaspora writers – Fahrook Dhondy, Amitava Kumar, Meera Syal, Anurag Mathur, Pankaj Mishra and Agha Shahid Ali – where the trope of the homeland will be seen as a partially existent and partially mythical a space.

KEYWORDS: Diaspora, Migration, Expatriate, Homeland, Space, Postcolonial.

What is home? On the one hand, 'home' is a mythic place of desire in the diasporic imagination. In this sense it is a place of return, even if it is possible to visit the geographical territory that is seen as the place of 'origin'. On the other hand, home is also a lived experience of a locality. Its sounds and smells, its heat and dust, balmy summer evenings, sombre grey skies in the middle of the day . . . all this, as mediated by the historically specific of everyday social relations. In other words, the varying experiences of pains and pleasures, the terrors and contentments, or the highs and humdrum of everyday lived culture that marks how, for example, a cold winter night might be differently experienced sitting by a crackling fireside in a mansion compared with standing huddled around a makeshift fire on the streets of nineteenth century England. (Brah 192)

The concept of home in a general sense is related to fixity of status. It refers to a dwelling place for the inhabitants, symbolically a guard or a protection from outside predators. The home is the seat for the residents, a place to live and thrive upon. However, when the context of the debate shifts to that of the position of home in migration and diaspora, the ambiguity in the fixity of the status lies clear. It is then a space at once close to and distant from the inhabitants. It is evident from the above quote by Avtar Brah that the home is a seat of many possibilities in diaspora. This paper seeks to portray this picture of a much debatable institution in diaspora, the home. The main focus of this paper will be on the fact that home is an ambiguous concept in diaspora, a nostalgic space, when penetrated with the distance of migration. The texts that will be the central focus in this paper are a few extracts of some diaspora writers like, Fahrook Dhondy's "Speaking in Tongues", Anurag Mathur's "The First Letter Home", Meera Syal's "Indoor Language", Amitava Kumar's "Flight", Agha Sahid Ali's "When on Route 80 in Ohio" and Pankaj Mishra's "There's No Place Like Home".

The effect of nostalgia for the homeland is a virtual phenomenon in diaspora, but the expatriate's reaction towards his/her homeland is a matter of debate. There are several factors like the socio-cultural and economic background, age and location, which decide this fact. Apart from the socio-economic background and the positionality in a foreign land (an outcome of Globalisation), age is also a very vital factor because of the fact that generational gap has a pivotal role to play in the practical understanding of diaspora. By practical understanding, I do not refer to the

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comprehension of diaspora as a concept; rather the essence of the lived-in moment of diaspora, as understood from the perspective of the expatriate.

The expatriate, exposed to acculturation, gazes back at the homeland to decode his/her existence in diaspora. The inhabitation in a foreign land causes a forcible transformation in culture and habits, which is an essential pre-requisite to cultural adjustment in an alien land. While talking about gaze, it can be argued that the awestruck gaze at the newly inhabited foreign land (or the foster homeland) is an outcome of the immigrant's excessive curiosity and is also psychologically a justification to his/her (self-chosen) migration. The extract titled "The First Letter Home", taken from Anurag Mathur's first novel, *The Inscrutable Americans* (1991), is about a small-town bred novice protagonist, Gopal Kumar, who is awestruck at the diversified culture in America. "The First Letter Home", as part of the main novel, is about Gopal's comic narration of his new found life in America (including the American language and culture), to his younger brother in the form of an epistle. This epistle is self-confessionary, an embarrassed account of his first travel by airway and his arrival at the American soil. Gopal, the elder son of a hair oil company owner from a small Indian town of Jajau, thinks of making it big at the Western soil. The dream in his eyes is not an exception to any immigrant, but it is the chase towards the fulfilment of his dreams; which is the guiding factor behind any immigrant's acceptability of the foreign land.

The foreign land is indicative of the stranger's dwelling, and every obvious fact and event in the foreign land seems strange due to its uniqueness and absence from

the homeland's scenario. It is ridiculous as well as bathetic to note that in Gopal's conception, a very "surprising thing about America is it is full of Americans" (Mathur quoted in Amitava Kumar 334). To him, the fact of observing Americans everywhere, "Americans, big and white. . . is little frightening" (Mathur quoted in Amitava Kumar 334). It is the vast cultural, racial and spatial difference, which strikes on the face of the immigrants like the novice Gopal, in the attempt of migration for beneficiary reasons, like job or education.¹ In this attempt, several immigrants assimilate, while others bear the brunt of homesickness.

Anurag Mathur's protagonist is homesick too, but his homesickness is caused mainly to satiate the anxiety of his family back at his hometown, Jajau. To him, the memories (memory being a very vital trope in diaspora) of his homeland is based on the curious and anxious faces of his family members, who equally feel the essence of expatriation in Gopal's psyche. A correct textual illustration can prove this point. In the first letter to his brother, Gopal notes,

Kindly assure Mother that I am strictly consuming vegetarian food only in restaurants though I am not knowing if cooks are Brahmins. I am also constantly remembering Dr Verma's advice and strictly avoiding American women and other unhealthy habits. . .

I am not able to go to bathroom whole time because I am sitting in corner seat as per Reverend Grandmother's wish. Father is rightly scolding that airplane is flying too high to have good view. Still please tell her I have done needful. (Mathur quoted in Amitava Kumar 334)

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The image of his family members in his mind is of caution against the myth of assimilation. For the new-comer Gopal, it is the fear of psychological mongrelisation (by ways of adopting the American culture), which makes him follow the (at times threatening) words of his family in its exact form. This is nostalgia for the homeland, where the homeland in question is a figure of threat against assimilation.

In Agha Shahid Ali's poetry collection titled *A Nostalgist's Map of America* (1991), the existence of Calcutta/India in the imagination of the expatriate in America, is starkly visible. The analysis of the poem "When on Route 80 in Ohio" from the anthology mentioned above can prove this nostalgic mapping of the homeland in the mind of the immigrant. A question that constantly lurks here is about the compression of time and space, whether it is the nostalgic immigrant who goes closer to the absent homeland or is it the absent homeland which crosses the boundaries of time and space and reaches out to its beckoner. The existence of two contrasting images of India and America is a product of this imagination. To the poet, in this poem, "India always exists / off the turnpikes / of America" (Ali quoted in Amitava Kumar 341), which secures the 'Indian' imagination in the 'American' soil. It denotes the existence of India in the immigrant's American life, probable only to the person concerned. The image of the mourning Ganges, "sobbing under the bridge" (Ali quoted in Amitava Kumar 341) is to be interpreted as the transfer of his own emotions to that of the homeland. This hypallage is significant of his emotions. The images of the vendors, bargaining women, street children, the tamarind leaves are an indication of the distant vision produced by his yearning for the earthy and

true pictures of his homeland. This yearning is very similar to that of the poetess' persona in Kamala Das' poems, where the nostalgia in her yearns to be in the place of her origin. However, in Das' poems of nostalgia for the homeland, her feminine sensibility is obvious, while in Agha Shahid Ali's poetry, the neutrality of the speaker's gender is symbolic of the feelings and emotions of any expatriate, irrespective of his/her gender.

The ending of the poem "When on Route 80 in Ohio" charts out a different spirit, indicative of the futility of the vision of the homeland. Herein, the space of America overtakes the nostalgic immigrant's imagination:

The warm rains have left

many dead on the pavements

The signs to Route 80

all have disappeared

And now the road is a river

polished silver by cars

The cars are urns

carrying ashes to the sea (Ali quoted in Amitava Kumar 342).

The image of the foreign land of America is totally different from that of the homeland, due to the fast paced lifestyle. It is the competitive world, the rush for power, the apparent un-homeliness, which disillusion the speaker of the lines. His

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nostalgia for the Motherland is interfered by the dreary picture of the life at America, with a sophisticated camouflaging.

Viewing the homeland with the gaze of nostalgia is evident in Pankaj Mishra's "There's No Place Like Home". Pankaj Mishra, the Indian essayist and novelist is the winner of the 2014 Windham-Campbell Prize for Non-fiction. This personal essay has an instrumental title, which justifies the spirit of nostalgia. However, this text is not a study in the diaspora of international immigration. Broadly speaking, it is to be read as an essay related to a spiritual or to be more pertinent, scholarly exile in Mashobra, a Himachali village north of Shimla, The migration makes the protagonist a wanderer and meditator on the surroundings and his own life, resulting in the bohemian spirit in his literary productivity. The town of Mashobra is equated to the self of the writer in the gradual acceptance towards modernisation and giving away the rustic simplicity. This indicates that both the writer as well as the town of Mashobra, have assimilated in diverse culture, a virtual outcome of urbanisation at a microcosmic level and globalisation at the macrocosmic.

In any case, time hasn't quite stood still for Mashobra. Places as much as people can be unfaithful. My slow betrayal of Mashobra has been accompanied by its own keen embrace of the modern world. You can buy Maggi soup as well as Tropicana orange juice in the jazzed-up kiraana dukaans. The Gables has a new wing. New buildings, some of them hotels, have come up in the vicinity of my cottage; the seclusion I so cherished, that

made possible all my reading and writing is gone. (Mishra quoted in Amitava Kumar 388)

The essence in Pankaj Mishra's account is his equation with the hometown Mashobra as a serene place, where creativity could be nurtured under seclusion. Since the place has lost this quality, it ceases to have its home like character of providing peace to the upcoming writer, in turn helping him with his literary creation. This text titled "There's No Place Like Home" has been referred in this paper to bring out the essence of the quest for a room of one's own, a space much like the homeland or the pseudo-homeland. It had been a place holding the writer's "most truthful memories" (Mishra quoted in Amitava Kumar 388), turning out his "most hopeless desires" (ibid.) in the quest for serenity and isolation required for creation.

Gaston Bachelard in *The Poetics of Space* (1958) argues on the similar equation between the homeland and the psychological affinity towards it. In his words,

Sometimes the house of the future is better built, lighter and larger than all the houses of the past, so that the image of the dream house is opposed to that of the childhood home . . . Maybe it is a good thing for us to keep a few dreams of a house that we shall live in, later, always later, so much later in fact, that we shall not have time to achieve it. For a house that was final, one that stood in symmetrical relation to the house we were born in, would lead to thoughts – serious, sad thoughts – and not to dreams. It is better to live in a state of impermanence than in one of finality. (Trans. Maria Jolas Chapter 2, Section VIII, "House and Universe")

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Bachelard provides with a description of the 'dream house', which is in-built in the memory of the (immigrant) dwellers. Through a reference to *The Poetics of Space*, Pankaj Mishra's "There's No Place Like Home" can be understood better.

The above mentioned text by Pankaj Mishra indicates the homeland as an ambiguous space, where serenity is the direct link to the essence of home. The extract "Flight" is taken from Amitava Kumar's *Bombay-London-New York* (2002). Amitava Kumar's imagination mingles with Rabindranath Tagore's imagination, when the latter had moved out to receive his Nobel Prize in 1913. The journey by flight (rising up high in the air inside the aircraft) is symbolic of alienation from the native land or original static existence. Kumar's article "Flight" arouses a critical viewing of the ambivalence of migration, a futility that converts hope to disillusionment.

The descendants of those who were, in Tagore's time, the subject peoples have now for long been flying planes. They also travel in planes. This situation also incites ambivalence. The travellers are often workers migrating long distances in search of work. In fact, such travel remains a part of the fantasy in the minds of the poor. There are many in the poorer countries of the world for whom the plane in flight represents the journey that, when undertaken in the future, will take them to the promised land. In airports all over the world, one can see the migrant workers from countries like Tagore's India, waiting to be taken to another place of work. (Kumar 371)

It is not just for migration, the symbolism of flight has been used by Amitava Kumar to highlight the use of it for several terrorist activities, whether in fact or fiction, by various terrorist groups working for a specific cause. However genuine the cause might be to the terrorists, it ultimately wrecks havoc across the globe. The protest against globalisation on the part of the terrorists makes every ordinary citizen pay the price of it. Kumar explains this myth with reference to the understanding of the “allegory of migration” (Kumar 372). He explains this allegory with reference to the real 9/11 terror attacks and Salman Rushdie’s novel, *The Satanic Verses*.

The use of aircrafts for the terror activities, reveal the adverse conversion of migration into one such terror attack. Terror reigns in travel. He explains:

On the morning of 11 September last year, nineteen men, in their appearance not different at all from the others who stand in the visa lines outside the embassies and consulates of rich nations in cities like Calcutta and Cairo, Karachi and Khartoum, hijacked four American jets filled with fuel and people. The suicidal acts of the hijackers also gave a perverse twist to the old story of the difficult travel to the land of plenty and promise. According to the reports that were published in the days following the attacks, it was revealed that the hijackers believed that their deaths promised them entry into the garden of heaven and the ministrations of seventy virgins. . . (Kumar 371)

Again he refers to a somewhat similar incident in Rushdie’s 1988 novel, *The Satanic Verses*, which,

opens with an explosion in the air. A jet is blown apart while in flight, and two actors tumble out, ‘like titbits of tobacco from a broken old cigar’. The

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two men, Gibreel Farishta and Saladin Chamcha, were passengers in the jumbo jet *Bostan*, Flight AI-420. In the night air around them 'floated the debris of the soul, broken memories, sloughed-off selves, severed mother-tongues, violated privacies, untranslatable jokes, extinguished futures, lost loves, the forgotten meaning of hollow, booming words, *land, belonging, home.*' Rushdie's fictional midair explosion was based on an actual event. On 28 June 1985, Flight AI-182 burst into flames off the coast of Ireland. The plane had taken off from Toronto and Montreal; it was headed for New Delhi and Bombay via London. All 331 people on board were killed. The plane's destruction was widely believed to be the work of Sikh extremists who wanted to avenge the Indian army's assault on the Holy Temple in Amritsar. Two Indo-Canadian Sikhs were arrested by the police and charged with first degree murder. Flight AI-182 had indeed been packed with migrants. . .

(Kumar 372)

Amitava Kumar's "Flight" hints at the means of alienation in migration. The distance caused transcends human imagination and cartographies, at times sacrificing the opportunities of migration to the terror activities. The promises along with the dreams of migration are broken as "(T)he West rushes up to meet the migrant, not as the promised land, but, instead, a parking lot that becomes for him a desolate, temporary graveyard." (Kumar 375)

Fahrook Dhondy's essay titled "Speaking in Tongues" is taken from *Voices of the Crossing: The Impact of Britain on Writers from Asia, the Carribean and Africa*

(2000), an anthology of writers about expatriation and migration to India's colonial master for nearly two centuries, Great Britain. The essay is about the impact of the language English on the Indian writer, who attempts to write in English, by giving his imagination the medium of the language concerned. The essay is an autobiographical tale of his personal ambition to become a writer, which led him to renounce his Chemical Engineering course. The debate whether the "Indian writers (should) write in English at all" (Dhondy quoted in Kumar 215) is addressed by Dhondy. This essay is instrumental in the domain of contemporary Indian writing in English, where learning and writing in the colonial master's tongue is also a form of enslavement. Fahrook Dhondy clearly states that " (T)o admit that one thought in English was somehow to admit that one's mind still wore the uniform of the departed conqueror." (Dhondy quoted in Kumar 215) The debate mentioned is pertinent in the present times, as the issues of identity are the crux area of postcolonial thought and literatures. Is the Indian writer writing in English a betrayer of his origin, culture and language? If it is a betrayal, then all the diaspora writers are traitors, which is however not at all the case. It is observed that Indian consciousness and ethnicity is equally housed in the diaspora writers, as in case of their in-house counterparts. With the breach of canon in the postmodern world, the fixity behind identity is lost. National identities are no longer exclusively based on the national origin, but also on the current citizenship due to migration. For instance, identities like Indian-American, Afro-American, Indo-British et cetera, are platforms to look at the native country and its language and culture, with the same belongingness.

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It is true that a language is a representative of a particular community or locality. But, language is a product of acquirement, and is not inherent in any individual. Speech is a result of environment and can be picked up. Language is a medium of expression, wherein, the ethos of the expression more or less remains the same, if languages vary. Fahrook Dhondy explains this with the interconnectedness of time and space, which the immigrants feel and understand.

I read Lawrence Durrell's *Alexandria Quartet* end to end, four books with a secret interconnection of a time-space continuum which only I of all the tram travellers could understand! Here was a richness of language, contrived, self-conscious, sentimentally exaggerated, that precisely answered the needs of my loneliness, my Bombay blues." (Dhondy quoted in Kumar 214)

The demand of multicultural writings appreciates expressions like the above, as it is essentially grounded in it. Multiculturalism does not imply the existence of many, rather the one implied in various ways. Language incorporated in literature plays a substantial role towards multicultural identities. According to Fahrook Dhondy, the demand for multicultural writings is because of an attempt to provide the minority a place in the land, community and language of the majority.

The demand of it came with unbearably ponderous baggage. If young black and brown people could see themselves in stories it would build their confidence in their identity. It was deemed psychologically traumatic for the black and brown readers of Britain to not recognise themselves in books and

turn page after page to imagine white men being heroic and white women beautiful. . . (Dhondy quoted in Kumar 220).

The quest for the homeland is an essential part of migration studies. The expatriate's voice is clear and audible enough as the voice of nostalgia, where the desire for belongingness to the homeland is primarily featured. Writing in diaspora or rather writing from the alien country on one's native land features a curious desire to know one's land of origin from one's current (culturally different) perspective. Again, as already noted in the introductory paragraph of this paper, age plays a vital role here. The first generation immigrants fret for the loss incurred by migration and are not willing to assimilate fully, while, the second generation immigrants face the challenge of dual identity, who officially bear the tag of the first world nation, but are not so fully. Jhumpa Lahiri's protagonist Gogol Ganguli in *The Namesake* (2003) is a virtual example of this.ⁱⁱ The protagonist Meena in Meera Syal's extract "Indoor Language" is an exciting and partly comic figure, from her novel, *Anita and Me* (1997), who faces similar challenges of identity. The novel *Anita and Me* is Meera Syal's debut novel, which is semi-autobiographical, and won the Betty Trask Award, which is an award for the debut novels written by novelists under 35 of the Commonwealth Nations. The story is about a British-Punjabi girl, Meena and her friendship with her English neighbour, Anita Rutter; in their growing-up years in the fictional Midlands village of Tollington, near Birmingham in the 1970s. She is an inwardly rebellious character, who is eager to accept the British norms. It can be observed that Meena is Gogol's British counterpart, for whom the homeland is a liquid space, floating somewhere between her parents' Indian norms at their British

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home, and her own aversion for the same. The concept of homeland is volatile to these immigrant teenagers.

The title "Indoor Language" refers to secrecy behind a particular language or a part of it. The use of slangs (are and) were very common in the vocabulary of a youngster in 1970s in Britain or America, but is considered objectionable by Meena's Indian family and acquaintances. The use of some forbidden words by Meena, imply her lack of prudishness behind its use. It is because of the pressures of acculturation created by learning new cultures and languages, which Meena succumbs to. Her use of the profane word implies her lack of understanding of the language-location equation, as to when what is to be spoken. She suffered from the syndrome of identity-crisis, which is very common among the children of the expatriate parents, who consider the new land as their home, but do not have the hereditary potential to acknowledge it as one. The violent repercussion of Meena's Indian family and acquaintances caters to the Indian traditional moral codes of proper behaviour and respect for the elders in any social gathering, which Meena unknowingly dishonoured.

There was a sudden terrible intake of breath and then complete silence, broken only by the harmonium emitting a death rattle as papa's fingers fell off the keys. In a split second, my beaming admirers had become parodies of Hindi film villains, with flared nostrils, bulging eyes and quivering, outraged eyebrows. They only needed twirling moustaches and pot bellies straining at

a bullet laden belt to complete the sense of overwhelming menace that now surrounded me. . .

‘What did you say, Meena?’

It was papa, in a tone of voice I had not heard before, which shot right off the Outraged Parent clapometer. (Syal quoted in Kumar 327-328)

The notion of home is in keeping with the relationship of the immigrant to the multiple locations, across the geographic and symbolically the cultural borders. In the words of Fazal and Tsagarousianou,

Within the frame of contemporary diasporas, the notions of ‘home’ and when a location becomes home are therefore linked with the issues related to inclusion or exclusion which tend to be subjectively experienced depending upon circumstances. When does a location become a home? How can one distinguish between ‘feeling at home and staking a claim to a place as one’s own?’ (Fazal and Tsagarousianou 11-12)

The notion of home is therefore very complex and is related to the subjective emotion of nostalgia. In fact, the immigrant nostalgia plays a yardstick to the judgement of a location as home. The immigrant psychology transcends the physical borders of a place, and establishes it a space, which mingles with the recognition of his/her homeland. Diaspora, it is observed, is not a backward-looking phenomenon, rather, it looks forward to the homeland as a space of desire, wish fulfilment, productivity and familiarity. The homeland promises welcome to the return of the native, as the Biblical Promised Land “flowing with milk and honey” (Cohen 5). The

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concept, however, is theoretical and provides no practical solution to the immigrants, otherwise, the concept of diaspora would not have existed. The simple but thought provoking question that strikes on the face of every immigrant as well as critics and readers of Diaspora Studies is 'Why Diaspora?'

The above question is debatable in the light of the texts already discussed in this paper. Diaspora has multiple social, economic, political and cultural reasons behind it. The ethnicity of diaspora is evident in terms of the existence of the notions of homeland in studies on diaspora. It is, as the title to this paper notes, a room of one's own – a personal space – which is partially existing, and partially mythical to the immigrant in question. It is symbolic of a lack, a void that the immigrant desires to fulfil, but cannot, as return is not a viable option to globalisation. Hence, the immigrants (in the Indian context at least) become an N.R.I., which is not just in the literal sense termed Non Resident Indians, but also as Shashi Tharoor notes in *India: From Midnight to the Millennium and Beyond* (1997), "Not Really Indians" or the contradictory "Never Relinquished India". (Tharoor 139)

Notes:

ⁱ Diaspora originates from the Greek word for 'scattering' or 'dispersion'. It denotes the movement of a population from its original homeland. It has been historically used for mass dispersions of involuntary nature, such as expulsion of Jews from the Middle East. Diaspora Studies is an academic field established in the late twentieth century to study the dispersed ethnic populations. The term in itself carries the connotation of forced settlement

due to expulsion, slavery, racism or war. However, due to Liberalization policies of various nations, migration from the Third World countries to the First World for better educational and employment facilities have culminated in voluntary migration. Literatures or writings on diaspora capture the immigrant experience to give an artistic bent to the process of exile, whether voluntary or involuntary.

ⁱⁱ Jhumpa Lahiri (b. 1967) wrote her first novel in 2003 titled *The Namesake*, which is the intergenerational story of the expatriate Indian-Bengali Ganguli family, settled in U.S.A. The novel is on Gogol's non-acceptance of his name initially, and later giving in to it to mark the memory of his father and the latter's love for Gogol's namesake – the Russian writer, Nikolai Gogol. The novel is about the second generation immigrant's adjustment issues and his identity crisis different from the preceding generation. *The Namesake* was preceded by her first collection of short stories, *Interpreter of Maladies* (1999), followed by another collection, *Unaccustomed Earth* (2008) and her second novel *The Lowland* (2013).

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About the Author: Baidehi Mukherjee, M.A. in English (Presidency College, Kolkata) & M.Phil. in English (University of Calcutta), teaches at Surendranath College for Women, affiliated to the University of Calcutta since 2010. She is a Visiting Faculty for Post-Graduation Studies at Basanti Devi College, University of Calcutta. She has authored the book titled *A Remote Mystery with Haphazard Clues: Memory as the Diasporic Condition in the Fiction of Jhumpa Lahiri*, published by Lambert Academic Publishers, Saarbrücken,

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Germany. Her area of specialization includes Postcolonial and Postmodern Theory and Literatures, Diaspora Studies, Indian Writing in English and Gender Studies. She is about to pursue a Doctorate Program soon.