

Unveiling Maternal Narratives: Exploring Diasporic Identity, Love, and Resentment in

The Namesake, A Place for Us, and Home Fire

by

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Abstract

This thesis uses affect in maternal narratives to investigate the diasporic complexities of passing down and upholding the traditions and cultures of a homeland that exists only in memory, while simultaneously encouraging assimilation, leading to a younger generation that grows a sense of resentment against this imagined homeland. Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Namesake* and Fatima Farheen Mirza's *A Place for Us* both follow the story of diasporic mothers who carry the memory of their homeland and take on the responsibility to pass on the homeland ideals to their children, whereas Kamila Shamsie's *Home Fire* tells the story of Isma, the eldest sibling who assumes a maternal role after their mother's death, living in constant fear of the West questioning her allegiance and her family's position.

Chapter one introduces the concept of the "mother of the nation" to investigate how diasporic mothers embody the homeland through their experiences of pain and loss. Chapter two addresses the generational divide created by the tension between maintaining loyalty to the imagined homeland and integrating into the West, a conflict largely driven by the mother's role as the guardian of cultural memory. This thesis argues that the diasporic mother, as a symbolic representative of the homeland, is often at the receiving end of the resentment directed towards the homeland ideals, making the motherhood role within the diaspora eternally isolating.

Lay Summary

In literature about national and postcolonial identities, women are often represented as “Mothers of the Nation.” Nowhere is this more visible than in the literatures of the South Asian diaspora, where mothers are bestowed with the task of reproducing the cultural and traditional expectations of the homeland. This thesis argues that because of the way women are constructed as representatives of the nation, South Asian diasporic mothers often become target of scrutiny leading to isolation and eventually resentment from their children who grow up confused, victims of marginality, and in between the identities of homeland and the West.

Preface

This thesis is an original, unpublished, independent work by the author Zarin Chowdhury.

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I write this thesis in a time when concepts of identity and belonging feel more precarious than ever. In recent years, borders have been continuously shaped and reshaped, communities

have migrated and been displaced, and the idea of “home” has been constantly reimagined. Yet, amidst these uncertainties, there remains a profound human capacity for adaptation, for holding onto the threads of culture and memory that ground us. It is this resilience that inspired me to work on this thesis.

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*for my mother, Sabera
whose patience, like the meaning of her name, has been boundless
& for all the women who made me the woman I am*

Introduction

Diaspora is often studied as a homogenous experience, with little attention given to its gendered dimensions. In the complex dynamics of cultural preservation and assimilation, diasporic women often bear the unique burden of being cultural and traditional ambassadors. They are frequently scrutinized for their role, responsible for raising children who subscribe to the values of what Salman Rushdie calls the “imaginary homeland”¹, while simultaneously teaching skills for assimilation. Through this forced ambassadorship, these women act as custodians of their heritage, preserving and transmitting the customs, beliefs, and practices of their homeland to their children in a foreign environment. This largely unrewarded responsibility generates profound pain and heartbreak, as seen in the stories of Ashima in Jhumpa Lahiri’s *The Namesake* (2003), Layla in Fatima Farheen Mirza’s *A Place for Us* (2018), and Isma in Kamila Shamsie’s *Home Fire* (2017). Avtar Brah notes that, in the South Asian context, “...women combine with other female kin and friends to create a dynamic and lively social and cultural life” (82). However, in the diaspora in the West, it becomes a more solitary and isolating state, as depicted by the lack of social support the mothers get when raising children (Lahiri 24). This absence of communal ties compels diasporic women to actively recreate the social and cultural networks of their homeland in the new environment, fostering a sense of belonging and cultivating a space where their heritage can thrive, and their children can connect to a shared cultural identity. However, they also want their children to be accepted in the West, which, this thesis argues, requires a form of assimilation. By highlighting the paradoxical ambassadorship of

¹ Rushdie uses the term “imaginary homeland” to describe the shifting, fluid nature of the idea of home in the diasporic experience. He argues that the concept of home is not a physical space with geographical boundaries, but rather a collection of memories, dreams, and imagination.

South Asian women in the diaspora in the three novels, my thesis uses affect to explore the complexities of passing down and upholding the traditions and cultures of a homeland that exists only in memory, while simultaneously encouraging assimilation, leading to a younger generation that grows a sense of resentment against this imagined homeland.

The novels of this thesis are all written by female diasporic authors with heterogenous diasporic experiences that are often reflected in their writing. These three novels span multiple generations and diverse spatial and temporal movements, offering a rich tapestry of diasporic life. Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Namesake* is a bildungsroman narrative following the marriage of nineteen-year-old Ashima, and her subsequent migration and upbringing of her children who are encouraged to integrate into the West. Connected by the similar genre of bildungsroman, but also more focused on preserving the homeland ideals, Fatima Farheen Mirza's debut novel *A Place for Us* navigates the varied immigrant experiences through Layla's family of five. Like Ashima, Layla is also married off to Rafiq as a teenager, and marriage becomes a means for migration to the West for both women. Layla navigates through cultural politics to encourage her children to hold onto the homeland ideals in the West, where they are constantly othered for being non-conforming, leading to a generational rift and identity confusion. This confusion leads to a sense of constant fear and insecurity, a theme echoed in Kamila Shamsie's *Home Fire*, which reimagines Sophocles' *Antigone* against the backdrop of British-Muslim identity. Shamsie's novel highlights the precarity of belonging in the West, as it follows the Pasha family: twin siblings Aneeka and Parvaiz, and their elder sister Isma who has taken on the maternal role of raising them since the death of their mother. The novel explores the scrutiny and suspicion faced by the family after their father's ties to ISIS, with Parvaiz tragically following in his father's footsteps, impelling Isma to take drastic measures, including reporting him to British authorities,

to protect herself and her sister from further scrutiny and the threat of displacement. This collective narrative arc in the three novels highlights the fraught balancing act between preserving cultural heritage and securing a foothold in the host society which constantly others them.

“Mother of the Nation”: Mothers as National Representatives

In the unfamiliar landscape of the host country, there is a “desire to transplant religious and cultural institutions” to recreate life from the homeland. In the diaspora, this responsibility falls largely on women, who are cast as the “mothers of the nation” and defenders of tradition and culture (Westwood 199). The very etymology of the word ‘nation’ underscores this connection to motherhood, deriving from the Latin *natio* for ‘birth’ or *nasci* meaning ‘to be born’ (Knor 8). Women are thus cast as literal and figurative birthers of the nation, linking their identities to the family and the home. Ania Loomba explains that “[t]he identification of women as national mothers stems from a wider association of nation with the family. The nation is cast as a home” (216), a metaphor that equates women’s domestic roles with national service. Susan Strehle expands on this, asserting that “[l]ike home, homeland connotes a settled, homogeneous place of mythic origins...a country-sized space of home, of kin and belonging, and therefore of sentimental unity” (2). In this view, women are expected to embody the emotional and moral core of the nation, responsible for maintaining an imagined unity that may not exist in reality.

Yet, this idealized role comes with significant costs. Women are not just passive vessels for national culture; they are active agents, but their labor—emotional, psychological, and physical—is often undervalued. Benedict Anderson’s idea that “nationality...nation-ness, as well as nationalism, are cultural artefacts of a particular kind” (4) highlights how nationhood is not

inherent but constructed through cultural practices, with diasporic mothers often positioned as key transmitters of these practices. This connection between nation and culture situates the mother as a symbolic bridge between the homeland and the host country, but it also traps her in a role that prioritizes cultural preservation over personal autonomy. Sara Ahmed points out that “[e]motions are associated with women, who are represented as ‘closer’ to nature, ruled by appetite, and less able to transcend the body through thought, will and judgement,” a rhetoric that presents women’s roles as less rational and less valuable than the physical and intellectual contributions attributed to men (*The Cultural Politics* 3). In this framework, women’s emotional labor—sustaining cultural values, managing domestic spaces, and fostering a sense of belonging in their children—is downplayed, despite its centrality to the diasporic experience. This marginalization of women’s contributions is exacerbated by their association with emotion rather than reason, reinforcing a hierarchy that diminishes the importance of their work.

The concept of “settling down” also reveals how deeply entrenched patriarchal expectations are in defining women’s roles within both the home and the nation. According to Susan Strehle, within patriarchy, “[h]ome belongs to women who ‘settle down’ in marriage and then establish residence in a dwelling place; there, they ‘settle’ (order and arrange, stabilize and establish on a permanent basis, subdue and make orderly) domestic affairs,” (1). This expectation forces women to find their sense of belonging through their roles as wives and mothers, limiting their agency to the domestic sphere. Even when women “‘settle for’ home arrangements despite their incomplete satisfaction with those arrangements,” they are expected to maintain domestic harmony, a reflection of how patriarchal systems confine their identities to the home:

Settling homes has been understood for centuries as the most proper occupation for women, shielded as home was thought to be from the aggression, materialism, and

competitiveness of the public arena. Home is imagined as a place of domestic order, separate from the outer public world of commerce, government, law, and other social institutions in which men exercise worldly power. (1)

However, as Strehle points out, home is not as separate from the public world as it appears. Instead, it is deeply political, a site where national ideologies are negotiated and perpetuated; “[s]ome of them [women] become ‘settlers’ in a new region or colonizers of a new land. On occasion, there are ‘settlements,’ small and potentially helpful communities—or property transfers in the event of divorce,” (1). In diasporic narratives, this collision between the domestic and the public is especially pronounced: “[f]rom a perspective conjoining feminist and postcolonial theory, home reveals its deeper affiliation with the public realm, as a patriarchal space where power relations vital to the nation and culture are negotiated” (1).

Therefore, the domestic is as political as the public, Strehle continues arguing that, “[h]ome is a receiver for public languages and values, a space where national discourse speaks and reproduces itself” (2). For generations, within patriarchy, women have been trained to maintain this standard of separation between the domestic and the public, while navigating political negotiation through underrepresented partnerships. This becomes evident in novels discussed in this thesis, where mothers negotiate and arrange marriages as agents of patriarchy, particularly transnational/diasporic marriages, as they are presented to be more lucrative.

As my thesis reveals, because raising children is considered a feminine responsibility, the burden of recreating the homeland and simultaneously assimilating—and the blame for failing to do so—disproportionately falls on mothers. Emotional labor, often linked to femininity as noted by Westwood and Ahmed, naturally aligns with the maternal figure responsible for the

preservation and continuity of cultural heritage. Success in the diaspora is often seen as the result of individual effort, whereas failure is attributed to the mother's shortcomings or perceived inadequacies, fostering resentment and regret between the child and the mother, and the homeland she represents. Lauren Berlant observes that the migrant's desire to recreate the imagined homeland in the host space is idealized as a means of achieving "the good life," despite the inherent cruelties of such optimism. This idealization can lead to disassociation and resentment among the second generation (Berlant 24). This resentment is compounded by the confusion of navigating assimilation into the West while remaining true to Eastern values (Shariff 459).

Consequently, the novels reveal how the idealized homeland becomes a source of tension and conflict, intensifying the emotional burden on diasporic mothers as they strive to balance cultural preservation with the demands of their new environment. She becomes the self-sacrificing figure tasked with raising a generation that is expected to be both grateful for her sacrifices and appreciative of the opportunities offered by the West. In *The Namesake*, Jhumpa Lahiri captures the emotional burden of the diasporic condition by likening it to "a sort of lifelong pregnancy," describing it as:

[A] perpetual wait, a constant burden, a continuous feeling out of sorts. It is an ongoing responsibility, a parenthesis in what had once been ordinary life, only to discover that that previous life has vanished, replaced by something more complicated and demanding. Like pregnancy, being a foreigner...is something that elicits the same curiosity from strangers, the same combination of pity and respect. (49)

This metaphor of pregnancy underscores the intertwined relationship between diaspora, affect, and femininity. The term “foreigner” is intricately linked to the experience of diaspora, evoking a deep sense of displacement and continuous struggle. The description of being a foreigner as a “perpetual wait” and a “constant burden” reflects the emotional and psychological strain of living outside one’s homeland. This state is portrayed as a “parenthesis” in life, highlighting how the diasporic experience disrupts and reshapes one’s sense of normalcy and belonging, while the diasporic body continues to exist as a foreigner for the national subject² of the host nation as analyzed in the sub-section titled “Diasporic Formations”.

As the nation is often symbolized as feminine, the mother figure in the diaspora embodies the nation’s continuity and sustenance. Here, the diasporic state becomes synonymous with pregnancy, while migration is metaphorically associated with penetration: “the soft national body is a feminised body, which is ‘penetrated’ or ‘invaded’ by others,” the other being the migrant (Lahiri 49; Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics* 2). Because both emotionality and gendered language are used to construct national identity and therefore the rhetoric of national defense, mothering becomes the means of sustaining that identity. James Clifford writes in “Diaspora” (1994),

Diasporic experiences are always gendered. But there is a tendency for theoretical accounts of diasporas and diaspora cultures to hide this fact, to talk of travel and displacement in unmarked ways, thus normalizing male experiences. When diasporic experience is viewed in terms of displacement rather than placement, traveling rather

² Ahmed defines the national subject of the host country as “the true recipient of national benefits”, and the diasporic body as the “other” with respect to the national subject (*The Cultural Politics* 1).

than dwelling, and disarticulation rather than rearticulation, then the experiences of men will tend to predominate. (313)

It comes as no surprise then, how diasporic experiences in written works are often centered around the male experience, male struggle or through a male gaze. The novels feature male characters whose defiance, resentment, or rebellions steer the story of the mothers and the sisters. My goal is to try to steer back to the maternal body and analyze diasporic experience through the maternal gaze by focusing on the affective role of the maternal figure in shaping the diaspora, and not the passive experiences of the mother as a dependent of the husband/son/brother.

South Asian Women's Migration

There is a significant historical and colonial context of South Asian women's migration for maternal care work that reveals ties to large-scale, post-partition migration. As Shilpi Gupta notes in her chapter "(Dis)Locating Homeland," "...migration from one part of the world to the other is not a recent phenomenon but one of the colonial projects to bring labor from colonized lands to the master land," underscoring how pre-partition migration was a colonial enterprise designed to benefit colonial Europe (Gupta 2; Brah 69). For over two centuries, the British Empire shaped migratory patterns to serve its own expansion and maintenance, often at the expense of the colonies. This exploitation not only deprived the subcontinent³ of developmental opportunities but also created impoverished conditions that pushed many to migrate as a means of escape. This reflects Ahmed's notion of the West taking, giving, and concealing its initial theft (*The Cultural Politics* 22). For South Asian women, migration options before partition were

³ Indian subcontinent is the region in Southern Asia spanning from the Himalayas to the Indian Ocean, consisting of Bangladesh, India, Pakistan as well as Bhutan, Maldives, and Sri Lanka.

largely limited to marriage or employment as *ayahs* (nannies), roles centered around child-rearing. The *ayahs* were frequently employed to care for British children, and their migration to Britain—or their enforced movement—was a direct result of British colonial needs (Brah 69). Often, they would travel between Britain and the subcontinent multiple times during the course of their employment, as their British “employers” would retreat back to Britain during the hot summer months. Other times, “...they were discharged, often without arrangements for their return home” and “...left to fend for themselves” (Stadtler & Visram; Brah 69). Stadtler and Visram write,

Many ayahs were dismissed without pay. They usually had no formal contract of employment and return passages agreed in India were not always honoured...the ayahs stayed in squalid lodging houses that charged high rent. An 1855 report drawing attention to their situation mentioned 50-60 ayahs living together in a disreputable lodging house on Ratcliffe Highway in the East End of London. Some ayahs were forced to beg in the streets for a passage back home. (“A home for the ayahs”)

Both migratory routes for women were dependent on their roles as maternal care workers. The migration of the *ayahs* was forced, often out of economic and financial necessity or due to emotional attachment to the British babies they had been raising; the other path for women to migrate—marriage—was to care for her husband and bear children.

This historical context is crucial for understanding the migration narratives of South Asian women post-partition, and their roles as mothers. Much like the stories of the women who were migrated as *ayahs* or wives, maternal care-work continues to be the primary motive of South Asian women’s diasporic narrative. Knor points out that “...the role of the mother is the

only route to gaining social value for many Indian women,” but “...allegorisation of the land as mother leads to idealising motherhood but rarely ever grants women any actual power in their own right” (10), exposing the patriarchal narrative of promoting motherhood as a respectable state only as far as child-bearing is concerned, especially for women with “many sons” whom she can “raise...to fight or defend the motherland” (9). Lahiri’s Ashima and Mirza’s Layla have no choice but to migrate in hopes of a better future for their children, and Shamsie’s Isma has no choice but to mother her siblings. But what becomes evident is that their pain of loss is often overshadowed by their desire for a “better life” in the West, a movement that has spilled across the Atlantic since the colonial period, and extended to North America as well, coining terms such as the “American Dream”⁴. Their journeys, like those of the *ayahs* before them, are marked by a lack of agency, propelled by external forces beyond their control. The pain of losing their homeland, family, and familiar cultural landscapes is inextricably linked to the power structures that dictate their movement.

Diasporic Formations

The diasporic body, conceived as a bridge between the homeland and the host country and existing in a “moment of transit” in space and time (Bhabha 2), is caught between identities; it attempts to develop a new, hybrid self while experiencing double marginalization that leads to emotional detachment and a sense of being stuck in time. I use the term “diasporic body” to connect affect with diaspora, recognizing that emotions are closely tied to bodily experiences. In *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, Ahmed explores how these emotional experiences affect

⁴ The American Dream is the idea that the United States is a land of opportunity that allows upward mobility, freedom, and equality for people of all classes who work hard and have the will to succeed (Britannica). However, I expand this term to broadly connote a Western Dream or movement to the West, with the West being a perceived place of endless opportunity.

othered bodies and how they position themselves within communities, forming social relationships. These affective experiences influence the discourse on national identity—determining who belongs within a nation, which groups are seen as part of its core identity, and how cultural values and norms are defined and contested. The focus shifts from how the body is othered by the host country to how the diasporic body others itself through the “desire to transplant religious and cultural institutions”, attempting to recreate life from the homeland (Westwood 199).

In the relationship between the diasporic body and the national subject of the host country, the national subject being “the true recipient of national benefits”, and the diasporic body becoming the “other,” both parties are often threatened by the loss of their idealized national identity (Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics* 1). The embodiment of a nationalized “we” is contingent on an exterior and often racialized Other, which in this case is the diasporic body (170). South Asian diaspora being one of the largest in the world, it is critical to consider the cause and effect of the movement of this specific group and their journey toward finding a home outside the homeland. The idea of finding a home and, through it, building a future seems to be what’s driving the diasporic movement within these stories. However, the movement from the homeland to the host land and the process of converting the host space into a home is an expensive one, both financially and emotionally. Ahmed argues that this drive to re-belong oneself within the diaspora and the host country comes from the false belief in happiness (*The Promise of Happiness* 10). According to Veenhoven, the diasporic subject believes that “happy persons are more likely to be found in the economically prosperous countries, whose freedom and democracy are held in respect and the political scene is stable” (16). This belief partly explains why the South Asian diaspora is one of the largest in the world; over two hundred years

of colonial exploitation created a legacy of political instability and lack of opportunities, while simultaneously promoting migration as a means of liberation. In contrast to the colonized homeland—symbolized as “underdeveloped”—the “West” is idealized as a land of opportunity and progress, marketing the westward movement as the ultimate escape from hardship. Berlant calls this hope for happiness through economic mobility “fantasy” and argues that this is a “stupid optimism” – “...the faith that adjustment to certain forms or practices of living and thinking—for example, the prospect of class mobility, the romantic narrative, normalcy, nationality, or a better sexual identity—will secure one’s happiness” (24, 126). This context of promised happiness is crucial to understanding the relationship between the diasporic community and the host society.

As the characters in the novels reveal, the belief in happiness is deeply paradoxical: happiness is neither immediately achieved upon arrival in the so-called “land of the free,” nor does it manifest in the way the diasporic subject imagined prior to migration. In reality, the pursuit of this idealized happiness often comes at a significant cost as this thesis explores. Once the diasporic subject realizes the illusion of happiness, they embark on a nostalgic journey to recreate or transplant their homeland into the new and unfamiliar host country. The formation of diasporas as cluster groups with shared cultural identity is a means for the homeland’s recreation into the host country. Stuart Hall defines cultural identity as reflecting “...common historical experiences and shared cultural codes which provide us, as ‘one people,’ with stable, unchanging and continuous frames of reference and meaning, beneath the shifting divisions and vicissitudes of our actual history” (258). This shared understanding of cultural identity allows diasporic bodies to encounter each other, as I explore in chapter one. While this allows the diasporic body to find a sense of community and support, the “one people” cultural identity also creates

expectations about how that culture needs to be represented within the diasporic sphere. The fear of failing to meet these expectations creates a sense of unease and insecurity which will be explored in chapter two.

The process of transplanting the homeland is also met with the host country's systemic structures of exclusion that force the diasporic body into a state of perpetual otherness. The promise of "...individual autonomy, which strains against submission to state power, family, and community" is shattered by the requirement for assimilation (Jain 41). Upon entering the host space, the diasporic body becomes hyper-aware of its difference and is othered by the very systems that promise inclusion. Removed from the comfort and familiarity of the homeland, they suddenly become acutely conscious of themselves as "foreign" and out of place. Ahmed describes this sudden awareness, stating, "although I have a sense of my body before each new encounter, my body seems to disappear from view; it is often forgotten as I concentrate on this or on that," illustrating how one can feel at home in the familiarity of their homeland but suddenly becomes hyper-aware of their otherness in the host country (*The Cultural Politics* 26). In this context, home becomes an imaginary space lodged in memory—a place the diasporic body continually seeks to recreate. Yet, this pursuit of an elusive homeliness in a space of exclusion creates a paradox where the effort to belong is constantly undermined by systemic exclusion, trapping the diasporic subject in a cycle of displacement and failure.

Chapter Outline

The first chapter of my thesis explores how the aspiration for westward movement, associated with upward mobility and a more comfortable life, is complicated by the fear and insecurity that arise when the illusion of this promise is exposed. Gendered narratives play a

significant role as both Ashima and Layla are married to men perceived as successfully established immigrants by those in their homeland, reinforcing the idea that these “helpless” female subjects can only be “saved” through marriage and subsequent migration. As the chapter reveals, the diasporic subject often feels compelled to express gratitude to the host country out of fear of being othered. The pain of loss becomes a central emotion through which female diasporic bodies navigate their identities as wives and mothers. Ahmed suggests that “pain is contingent in the sense that it attaches us to others,” and this model of pain is evident in how these women’s identities are shaped (Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics* 22). For female diasporic subjects like Ashima and Layla, identity is defined by their transition from their paternal households to their husband’ homes, where their roles shift from dutiful daughters to dutiful wives, and then to mothers. This lack of agency in defining themselves as individuals fosters a deep-seated fear of losing the familiar, compelling these women to reproduce both biologically and culturally to recreate a sense of homeland in the diaspora.

The chapter further examines how the diasporic community is formed as a defense mechanism to cope with this fear of isolation and loss of the familiar. To unravel the complex interplay of fear in shaping maternal roles, I draw on Ahmed’s argument that fear serves “to secure the relationship between...bodies...bring[ing] them together and mov[ing] them apart,” a concept that captures the tension between the desire to preserve the homeland and the pressure to assimilate (69). This dynamic engenders confusion for the next generation, caught between conflicting cultural expectations. The chapter illustrates that it is this very fear—of being othered by the national subject of the host country—that drives the diasporic body to distance itself, creating a distinct cultural identity within the diaspora as a means of self-preservation. At the same time, this fear compels them to demonstrate allegiance to the host land, as depicted through

Isma, so as not to have their loyalty questioned, further entrenching the diasporic community's complex negotiations with identity and belonging.

Building on the indispensable role of the diasporic mother as the representative of the homeland, as established in chapter one, the second chapter of my thesis delves into the complexities of hybrid identities and the pervasive presence of resentment within the diaspora, particularly concerning the diasporic mother's role as both nurturer and teacher. These mothers bear the Herculean task of raising a generation that can embody the values and culture of their homeland while simultaneously navigating the demands of the host culture. The child's inability to seamlessly integrate the two leads to the mother's role being scrutinized, resulting a turbulent dynamic characterized by love and resentment between the maternal figure and her offspring, and between the diasporic body and the homeland and the host country. In this chapter, I explore the complex relationship between love and shame, elucidating how the paradoxical tension between maintaining distinct cultural identities and assimilating into the host society engenders profound identity confusion for the second-generation.

Chapter two dissects the clash between the immigrant narrative, which emphasizes building a new home through assimilation and seeking acceptance, and the diasporic narrative, which is shaped by a collective resistance to assimilation and a lingering sense of loss and longing for the homeland. Despite their efforts to assimilate, the diasporic body is often preemptively marked as “the other”—as Ahmed poignantly notes, “[t]he other is already seen as dirt” (49)—rendering these efforts ultimately futile. This state of perpetual liminality fosters a deep-seated resentment, trapping the diaspora in a self-perpetuating cycle where the diasporic mother repeatedly falls short of her imposed roles as the reproducer of the homeland and the “mother of the nation.” Ahmed writes, “[t]he reproduction of femininity is tied up with the

reproduction of the national ideal through the work of love...”, a notion I use to argue that the mother’s fear of losing her children, and through them her hope of preserving a diasporic homeland, as well as her desire for acceptance by the West, all stem from her conception of love (124). This love, paradoxically, becomes both a means of connection and a source of anxiety as the child navigates the competing pressures of cultural preservation and assimilation, leading to a sense of resentment towards the mother and the homeland she represents.

Chapter One: Becoming Mothers in the Diaspora

“Eight thousand miles away in Cambridge, she has come to know him. In the evenings she cooks for him, hoping to please, with the unrationed, remarkably unblemished sugar, flour, rice, and salt she had written about to her mother in her very first letter home,” (Lahiri 10). This was the newlywed life of nineteen-year-old Ashima, one of Jhumpa Lahiri’s central characters, the maternal figure in her 2003 bestselling novel *The Namesake*. The story begins with Ashima’s metamorphosis from an aspiring teenager to a dutiful wife. For the first time in her life, Ashima boards an airplane and crosses an ocean, leaving her parents and her old life behind for a new one with her husband. She is in no rush to get married, yet when Ashoke and his family come to *see* her, she “obediently but without expectation” dresses and prepares herself to impress them (7). Layla, in Fatima Farheen Mirza’s *A Place for Us* finds herself in a similar situation; also nineteen, she is “married off” to Rafiq and responsible for raising children. My choice of the phrase “married off,” rather than “marries,” is deliberate, underscoring the lack of agency that both Ashima and Layla experience in their marriages. Lahiri and Mirza offer some semblance of autonomy by showing the characters’ initial attraction to their future husbands; however, this attraction is a product of cultural and patriarchal constructs defining the “qualities” of an ideal spouse. In truth, Ashima and Layla’s roles as potential brides are passive. Layla says, “[m]umma tells me it is a great proposal. [t]hat I have no reason to refuse it” and “[m]umma says he has a good job,” illustrating how her voice holds little weight against her mother’s, who functions as a maternal agent of patriarchy (19). While this maternal view might seem oppressive, Adrienne Rich distinguishes between “the patriarchal institution of motherhood and the experience of mothering, which is not inherently oppressive” (Takeševa 182). Although raising children is historically seen as a woman’s responsibility, Rich’s distinction points to the lack of agency

women often have in choosing the societal frameworks in which they mother their children. The “patriarchal institution of motherhood” perpetuates the cycle of patriarchy: Layla’s mother learns from her own mother, while Layla looks to her mother for ideals. In this chapter, I track the role of loss in the light of pain and fear, and their marginalizing qualities for the diasporic mothers as represented in the selected novels. This chapter specifically focuses on the process of becoming diasporic mothers, their precarious position within the West and the diaspora, and navigates their training and migration as “mothers of the nation” (Westwood 199). For this, I discuss the role of the failed American Dream and the façade of agency and power, and their affective qualities in making of the diasporic mother.

The Façade of the American Dream

The West⁵ has generated a façade as the land of the free through false marketing of ethics and law and by generating generalized stereotypes (i.e. the West as civilized and the East/Global South as backwards and barbaric). In *The Namesake*, during his train ride to visit his grandparents, young Ashoke meets a man named Ghosh who speaks “...reverently of England. The sparkling, empty streets, the polished black cars, the rows of gleaming white houses...like a dream. Trains departed and arrived according to schedule...No one spat on the sidewalks...,” thus contrasting “civilized” England with “crowded” India (15). At the same time, he also mentions that he had to return “home” “because his wife was inconsolably miserable abroad” (15). Note how even though he is impressed by the standards in the West, India continues to be his home where he could return. Additionally, the same standards that impressed him so much failed to

⁵ Also known as the Western world, containing various nations and states in the regions of Western Europe, Northern America, and Australasia, countries and regions primarily associated with colonizing and attributed to be “developed”.

affect his wife, connotating a gendered aspect within the perception of the “civilized” world. The term “civilization” is inherently problematic because it is steeped in a colonial legacy that has long been used to justify domination, exploitation, and cultural erasure. By invoking “civilization” as a measure of cultural and social development, the West often promotes itself as a bastion of individual rights and freedoms, emphasizing ethics like freedom of speech, religion, and expression. This narrative marginalizes diverse ways of living, governing, and understanding the world, reinforcing a power dynamic that privileges Western norms while dismissing alternative perspectives and touting laws and ethical frameworks as proof of the West’s moral authority and commitment to equality, despite their selective application and the persistent inequalities within their own borders. Thus, the term “civilization” not only implies a false sense of moral superiority, but also serves as a tool of cultural imperialism, maintaining a global order that favors Western dominance.

Before Ashima and Layla’s marriage to Ashoke and Rafiq respectively, other potential grooms had come to see Ashima, and Layla had felt a sense of affection for the ice-cream seller Raj. But what makes Ashoke and Rafiq stand out from the others is the fact that they are the means for a passage to “civilized” America and therefore the saviors of these women. Because of their connection to and position in America, these men are praised and deemed more deserving and fit compared to other potential matches. “An American boy must be rich!” says one of Ashoke and Ashima’s relatives during their son, Gogol’s, “*annaprasan*, [...] rice ceremony,” which shows the cultural perception that an Indian man living in America is considered better off than someone residing in the home country (40). Ashima and Layla are told that leaving their homeland and migrating to America will be a great opportunity for them, that only the “lucky ones” get to go to America and that they can have a “good life...an enriched one, a pious destiny”

(Mirza 20). By moving to America, Ashima and Layla will now have the ironic opportunity to settle down and raise a family in America where their children will allegedly have endless opportunities, or so the West would have you believe, even if it means they must experience the pain of loss by leaving their family and nation behind, and therefore risk being “inconsolably miserable” like Ghosh’s wife (Lahiri 15). However, this journey to America is not one of empowerment for women like Ashima and Layla; it is rooted in their subservience and the expectation that they will serve their husbands—“cook[ing] for him, hoping to please” (10). By shifting Ahmed’s quote “...to feel love for the nation...is also to feel injured by these others, who are ‘taking’ what is yours”, it becomes evident that losing the nation by migrating, and therefore *giving up* “what is yours”, also becomes a significant moment of pain, even if that loss is initiated by the self (*The Cultural Politics* 1). This analysis illustrates how power and pain are fundamental to understanding the diasporic experience, particularly for women who face layered challenges.

Even though it becomes evident that life in America is not as perfect as the eager migrant hoped, and that this life comes with a large price tag of pain, Ashima continues to hold onto the hope of the American Dream. Despite its promise of opportunity and acceptance, the American Dream often requires conformity to specific social and cultural norms, effectively forcing immigrants into a paradox where they are expected to assimilate without ever truly being embraced as equals. Anupama Jain in her essay “Reading Assimilation and the American Dream as Transnational Narratives” challenges this paradox of “Americanization” as a means for naturalization⁶:

⁶ The legal word for nationalizing or giving citizenship to a “foreigner,” often after the “foreigner” has passed a citizenship test and proved themselves as deserving.

...stories of America have usually prioritized individual autonomy, which strains against submission to state power, family, and community. Yet the process of assimilating to a national collective (to some degree at least) is an inescapable element of contemporary citizenship; migration experiences merely amplify one's recognition that this is so. (41)

This paradox of Americanization of the diasporic subject, which is essentially the opposite of the American Dream (since the American Dream promises acceptance of diversity, and Americanization only allows assimilation) can be compared to Berlant's concept of "cruel optimism." Berlant defines "cruel optimism" as an attachment to an ideal like the American Dream, "... whose realization is discovered either to be impossible, sheer fantasy, or too possible, and toxic" (24). As depicted in *The Namesake*, Ashima quickly realizes the impossibility of the American Dream and its dissonance from lived experience, but continues to be optimistic and present a positive view of her life in America to her family back home. Lahiri is sure to highlight Ashima's disappointments in this sudden new life in Boston, "[i]t is not at all what she had expected. Not at all like the houses in *Gone With the Wind* or *The Seven-Year Itch*..." (30). This exposes how Ashima builds up expectations about the West from the films on screen only to find out that in reality, "[t]he apartment is drafty during winter, and in summer, intolerably hot. The thick glass windowpanes are covered by dreary dark brown curtains. There are even roaches in the bathroom, emerging at night from the cracks in the tiles," (30). This juxtaposition between her expectations and reality underscores the "cruelty" in her continued optimism even after getting to know about the harsh reality.

Ashima's initial hopes, shaped by idealized images of America, are dashed by the everyday hardships she faces – uncomfortable apartment, pests, etc. Despite these disappointments, she clings to a positive view of her life in America, reflecting the psychological

grip of the American Dream as an aspirational yet ultimately deceptive ideal. This tension reveals how diasporic subjects like Ashima are caught between the promise of inclusion and the reality of exclusion, perpetually striving for a dream that is fundamentally at odds with their experiences. Rather than breaking away from this cruel construct, Ashima remains complicit in upholding the illusion of the West as the utopic “land of the free.” Driven by a fear of being othered, she conforms to the unwritten expectation that the diasporic body must not “bad-mouth” the “graceful” land that has provided her with a home. In her letters back to India, she avoids mentioning her struggles. Instead, she glorifies mundane aspects of her new life:

She has kept her disappointment to herself, not wanting to offend Ashoke, or worry her parents. Instead she writes, in her letters home, 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)

Here, Ashima's need to appear grateful to her “saviour” husband and the West—which supposedly “liberated” her from the East—becomes clear. If she does not present herself as grateful, she risks being perceived as “‘out of place’immigrant woman...who has not ‘gratefully’ received the hospitality or even the love that has ‘let her into’ the ‘we’ of a civil nation” (Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics* 170). This fear compels her to maintain her optimism about life in the West, even when it diverges sharply from the fictional narratives of the films she grew up watching.

The Politics of Fear

The notion of “cruel optimism” also functions as a coping mechanism for the perpetual state of fear that the diasporic body inhabits—a fear rooted in the threat of being othered by the

national subjects of the host country, “the true recipient of national benefits” (Ahmed *The Cultural Politics* 1). In Ashima's case, this fear materializes in her need to uphold a façade of gratitude in her letters home, masking the everyday challenges and alienation of immigrant life. However, as Lahiri's narrative demonstrates, the very process of othering is inextricably linked with the logic of Americanization and naturalization, rendering any hope of assimilation a form of cruel optimism—a belief that the dream of acceptance is within reach, only to find that it is perpetually withheld. This theme is further explored in Shamsie's *Home Fire*, where three British-Pakistani Muslim siblings—despite being born and raised in the UK—are constantly subjected to suspicion and scrutiny regarding their allegiance. Legally, the UK is their homeland, yet their identity is continuously questioned, reinforcing the idea that the West others those who do not fit its ideal. Isma, the eldest sibling, confronts this exclusionary logic in a conversation with her supervisor, Dr. Hira Shah, pointing out how those who fail to conform to national ideals are “rhetorically being made un-British” (28). She emphasizes the bias in media portrayals of terrorism: perpetrators are “never described by the media as ‘British terrorists.’ Even when the word ‘British’ is used, it is always ‘British of Pakistani descent,’ ‘British Muslim,’ or ‘British passport holders,’ always something interposed between their Britishness and terrorism” (28). Isma's insight reveals how the use of qualifiers like “of Pakistani descent” or “Muslim” implicitly denies full Britishness to those who do not align with the idealized national image. The language used by the media creates a hierarchy in which some are deemed “truly” British, while others are seen as conditional citizens, underscoring the futility of trying to achieve full belonging in the host country. The siblings' experiences show that the expectation of assimilation is ultimately a setup for failure, as they must continually prove their loyalty to be accepted—a hope that cruelly persists despite its inherent contradictions.

At the airport, Isma is interrogated by Border Control, asking her: “[d]o you consider yourself British?” Although she replies, “I *am* British,” he pushes on, asking,

“But do you consider yourself British?”

“I’ve lived here all my life.” (2, *my emphasis*).

The interrogation continues for nearly two hours, with Isma compelled to prove her allegiance to the state despite telling them that she *is* British. She is questioned on her views regarding “Shias, homosexuals, the Queen, democracy, The Great British Bake Off, the invasion of Iraq, Israel, suicide bombers, dating websites,” — topics carefully chosen for their perceived cultural conflict with Muslim identities (2). Though the West is often portrayed as a liberating force compared to the East, particularly for women, it becomes evident that such liberation is only extended to those whom it deems deserving. Here, “deserving” does not suggest active engagement or activism but rather passive compliance with Western norms. As a Brown Muslim woman, Isma cannot entirely assimilate into a society that seeks to maintain a certain self-image, where “Englishness is hegemonic” (or “Americanness,” in the case of the United States), and where anyone failing to fit this idealized notion is othered (Westwood 206). She understands that any response challenging the narrative of the obedient diasporic subject could jeopardize her place in the nation, revealing the precarious position of those who do not conform. With this fear, Isma, and her sister Anika, prepares for possible questions and scenarios, pretending to converse with “...customer of dubious political opinions whose business Isma didn’t want to lose by voicing strenuously opposing views, but to whom she didn’t see the need to lie either (3). This constant fear of being othered generates hate, both towards the diasporic subject who “penetrates” the hegemonic Britishness/Americanness and fails to assimilate, and also towards the host land that

fails to accept, leading to a feeling of constant homelessness for the diasporic body (Ahmed, *The Cultural Politi* 2).

Pain and fear are inextricably linked to the experience of loss—loss of homeland, culture, and familiarity. This fear becomes an ever-present force in the lives of these diasporic mothers, shaping their instincts and sense of self. However, the fear is not only of the West challenging their precarious position but also of their position in the diaspora being challenged from within the diasporic community. As mothers of the nation, their maternal roles entail maintaining a perfect family image as per homeland standards. As the section in this thesis titled “Diaspora as a Defense” discusses, the diasporic community becomes a means for the mother to feel a sense of homeland and belonging with the host country. Failure to maintain homeland cultural practices within the family risks the family’s position within the diaspora. In *A Place for Us*, Layla’s anxiety about maintaining the image of a perfect family peaks at her daughter’s wedding, revealing her internal struggle. She is consumed with fear that her son’s estrangement will be exposed, and she takes desperate measures to prevent it: “took out *sadaqa*⁷ money...extra...then more, to protect from any comment about her son’s return in a tone that could threaten its undoing” (4). This moment reveals how fear governs her actions, compelling her to shield her family from judgment at any cost. Yet, when she looks at her daughter, who seems to have achieved the ideal balance between homeland traditions and Western expectations, Layla momentarily feels a surge of pride and power—“[l]ook what we have done together,” she wants to say to her husband (11). For Layla, success as a diasporic mother is anchored in her daughter’s ability to navigate both cultural worlds, a fragile achievement that feels like her only defense against the fear of failure. She longs for validation, wishing that “...her parents had been alive to

⁷ The concept of charity or voluntary giving in Islam.

see it. How proud they would be, how happy to attend the wedding of their first grandchild” (3). Layla’s sense of self-worth and purpose is tightly bound to this fleeting moment of perceived success, underscoring how her value is defined by her ability to meet both cultural and familial expectations in the face of overwhelming fear.

Western Sufferings, Diasporic Sorrows

Ahmed argues that “...the West gives to others only insofar as it is forgotten what the West has already taken in its very capacity to give in the first place... So the West takes, then gives, and in the moment of giving repeats as well as conceals the taking,” underscoring how the West presents itself as a liberating force while neglecting to acknowledge that it is often the West’s own actions that have created these constrained circumstances (*The Cultural Politics* 22). Examining the historical context of South Asian women’s migration to the West, as explored in the introduction, reveals how the West has long sought to create conditions in the Global South that fuel large-scale migration to its own advantage. By concealing the fact that these conditions are a direct result of Western colonization, the West positions itself as a benevolent force, expecting gratitude from migrants for their so-called “liberation.” Elizabeth V. Spelman, in *Fruits of Sorrow: Framing Our Attention to Suffering*, notes that sufferers—such as the diasporic body—are often positioned as the objects of compassion in ways that reinforce power imbalances between the compassionate (in this case, the West) and the suffering. She argues that “[c]ompassion, like other forms of caring, may also reinforce the very patterns of economic and political subordination responsible for such suffering,” revealing the irony that while the West promotes itself as a force for the development and liberation of women, it is selective of who it liberates (7). For instance, even though Western feminism presents itself as an exemplary movement for the freedom of women, when it comes to Muslim women choosing to wear hijab,

as in the case of Isma and Anika, hijab becomes a symbol of oppression or threat. Liberation, within the Western ideals, is only possible through assimilation:

Don't set yourself apart in the way you dress, the way you think, the outdated codes of behavior you cling to, the ideologies to which you attach your loyalties. Because if you do, you will be treated differently—not because of racism, though that does still exist, but because you insist on your difference from everyone else in this multiethnic, multireligious, multitudinous United Kingdom of ours. And look at all you miss out on because of it. (Shamsie 62-63)

The insistence that differential treatment stems from one's refusal to assimilate, rather than from systemic racism, shifts the blame for exclusion onto the marginalized individuals themselves. The irony is exposed in the coercive nature of this demand for assimilation. The passage warns against "setting yourself apart" through visible markers of difference under the guise of integration in a "multiethnic, multireligious, multitudinous United Kingdom." This exposes that while migration to West is presented as a once in a lifetime opportunity, with the West being a "liberating" force, there exists a critical power imbalance between the diasporic body and Western "compassion" that generates a sense of othering and leads to self-doubt as a diasporic body.

In *Home Fire*, after their mother and grandmother's deaths, Isma inevitably becomes responsible for raising her twin siblings. She experiences feelings of powerlessness and self-doubt when her brother Parvaiz is influenced and manipulated into leaving London to join ISIS in Raqqa, Syria. Parvaiz struggles with his identity and feels disconnected from his family and society, becoming susceptible to radicalization. He is influenced by Farooq, a charismatic

recruiter, who manipulates Parvaiz by appealing to his desire to understand his father and his own place in the world. Both Isma and those around her often blame her for Parvaiz's upbringing and his decision to join ISIS. Reflecting on Eamonn, who she initially doesn't realize is the son of controversial British Home Minister Karamat Lone, Isma thinks, "[s]omeone raised him the way I tried to raise Parvaiz," holding herself accountable for Parvaiz's tragic choices (13). Isma's feelings of guilt, shame, and inadequacy are deeply felt as she questions her role in Parvaiz's radicalization. These emotions affect her sense of identity and self-worth, as well as her position as a diasporic subject, as she is constantly interrogated. The novel initially presents the family unit as a "symbol of resistance" against the racist perception of being associated with terrorism after their father abandons them to join the Jihadi movement (Loomba 217). When Parvaiz also abandons them to join ISIS, Isma must defend whatever family she has left by informing the police herself about Parvaiz, and therefore "made him not able to come home" once he realizes his mistake. Isma's declaration to Anika—" [w]e are in no position to let the state question our loyalties...If you cooperate, it makes a difference"—reveals the deep-seated anxiety of a diasporic family perpetually under surveillance (30). The phrase captures Isma's acute awareness of their vulnerable position in a society quick to otherize and condemn them based on their identities. Her decision to report Parvaiz to the authorities is not just a tragic choice but also a survival strategy, driven by the fear that any perceived disloyalty could result in their total exclusion from the "we" of the nation.

Unlike Anika, "who knew everything about her rights and nothing about the fragility of her place in the world", Isma is always hyper-aware and in fear not only because of her position within the West being challenged but also because of fear for her sister's position (3). Ahmed states, "[r]ather than seeing fear simply as an inevitable consequence of women's vulnerability,

feminist critics argue that fear is a response to the *threat* of violence” (*The Cultural Politics* 69). Maternal diasporic bodies like Isma, as well as Ashima and Layla, always have to be “careful” to not give the host land an opportunity to question their allegiance and therefore the legitimacy of their children’s connection to and position in the West. Ahmed writes,

The word ‘careful’ is interesting, as it reminds us of the link between care and anxiety. To ‘have care’ (even care for others), can also mean to ‘take care’, which may engender an anxious relation to the world (‘carefulness’)...Being careful is an anxious feeling...We might note here, that femininity is associated with both care and anxiety. A feminine relation to objects could be described as a mode of carefulness, which actually restricts the mobility of the feminine body within domestic space, as well as public space. (*The Cultural Politics* 80)

All the three women, Isma, Ashima and Layla are always anxious about their loved ones, and hence dedicate their lives caring for them. Brah writes, “[f]amily’ is also where the appropriation of women’s caring work masquerades as ‘labour of love’” highlighting how women are *expected* to care as their responsibility and their love (and dedication) is evaluated through the extent of their caring (75-76). Isma had to delay her own aspirations and education to take up a menial job after her mother and grandmother passed away so she could care for her siblings. Her character is judged by the extent of her care of her siblings and the outcome of that care (which is evaluated by the actions of her siblings as adults). Ashima and Layla represent the group of first-generation diasporic women who give up their homeland and endure the pain of loss, so that they may care for their family, which they believe they can do in the West since the West is believed to have endless opportunities, “[i]n America anything is possible” (Lahiri 100).

Diaspora as a Defense

First-generation diasporic women, despite the false promise of empowerment and opportunities, often find themselves isolated and unemployed in their new environments. In response, many turn to raising children to give purpose to their lives and anchor themselves in the West. Unlike the homeland of Ashima and Layla's memories—where they had familial support and a sense of community—America can be a lonely place where they are continually othered. Brah observes:

At home, Asian women combine with other female kin and friends to create a dynamic and lively social and cultural life. These female cultures are...constitutive of structures of support and space within which gender specific activities, including leisure, may be constructed and performed. They are a means of negotiating and/or combating hierarchies of power in the household and in the wider community. These cultures are the arena where diverse and heterogeneous women's identities are played out. (82)

In the absence of this support, the companionship of their children becomes a vital source of comfort and connection within the diaspora (Brah 77). In the diaspora, because there is no inherent sense of cultural and social network, as seen in the stories of Ashima and Layla, this leads to a profound sense of isolation and a desire to recreate a sense of community. The loneliness feels threatening as Western ideologies encroach upon their everyday lives through mundane elements such as clothes, food, and language. They seek alternative forms of support to fill these social and cultural voids created by their migration from their homelands. The births of their children can be seen as a strategy to sustain their cultural and traditional beliefs against what they perceive as Western encroachment, fulfilling their roles as the “mothers of the nation.”

Yet, as Lahiri illustrates, Ashima 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).

In order to tackle that sense of isolation and the fear of Western invasion, which is inverted within the diasporic context, migrants cluster to create a diasporic community as a means of defence. Ahmed explains how Western nationalistic discourse frames migrants as invaders, “swarms of illegal immigrants and bogus asylum seekers” “penetrating” Western borders (*The Cultural Politics* 1, 170). However, even within the diaspora, there is also a sense of cultural invasion by the West into the homeland traditions and beliefs, the threat of which is defended by recreating homeland communities through clusters. In *The Namesake*, the weekly gatherings become a place of cultural regeneration,

They have met so many Bengalis that there is rarely a Saturday free, so that for the rest of his life Gogol's childhood memories of Saturday evenings will consist of a single, repeated scene: thirty-odd people in a three-bedroom suburban house, the children watching television or playing board games in a basement, the parents eating and conversing in the Bengali their children don't speak among themselves. (Lahiri 62-63)

The same is seen in *A Place for Us*, “[e]very weekend there are countless functions and family-friend parties” (Mirza 29). The gatherings become a space for cultural bonding, as depicted through the choice of food, clothing, and the separation between the spaces of men and women (51). The novels depict a strong support system within the diaspora as Lahiri exclaims about the Gangulis, “[e]ach step, each acquisition, no matter how small, involves deliberation, consultation with Bengali friends” (64). Using Gilroy’s (1987) description of “alternate public spheres”, Clifford writes, “[d]iaspora discourse articulates, or bends together, both roots and routes to

construct...alternate public spheres, forms of community consciousness and solidarity that maintain identifications outside the national time/space in order to live inside, with a difference” (308). The community becomes a means of cultural transplantation within the host country; all the aunties and uncles, even though not related by blood, play the role of extended family members coming together on occasions of celebrations as well as of mourning.

In the diaspora, motherhood is often depicted as a significant honor, with the belief that children born to diasporic mothers are poised for a promising future due to their birth in the West. I have already discussed how the West presents itself as this liberating force, but what becomes evident through the study of Ashima, Layla, and Isma’s stories, is that diasporic motherhood can also be read as isolating. As diasporic subjects they must navigate the struggles of feeling homeless, rooted in an imaginary homeland of the past while balancing the struggles of becoming mothers detached from their cultural roots. This paradoxical expectation often leads to a sense of clash between the mother and her children. This tension is evident in how Layla and Rafiq raise their children by tightly controlling and limiting their access to “Western culture⁸.” For instance, their children are not allowed to socialize with peers outside of school; Rafiq insists, “[t]here is no such thing as friends, only family, and only family will never desert you,” (Mirza 53). He tells his daughters explicitly, “...boys are not your friends, they are acquaintances when you are in the classroom, and you have to keep your distance” (72).

Layla's refusal to defend her children against these restrictions fuels Hadia, her daughter's, resentment, who feels that her mother has “turned against her own children just to

⁸ “Western culture” is a very broad term used to describe the social norms, belief systems, traditions, customs, values, etc. of the Western world (Europe and the Americas). I am using the term in this context to denote the perception of the migrant and the people of the East and Global South towards the lifestyle of the West, particularly focusing on the contrast between Western culture and that of South Asia, which is reflected in the South Asian diaspora.

stand by her husband” (57). Layla’s compliance with her husband's rules is crucial for maintaining the cultural expectation of a South Asian woman's role within a patriarchal framework—upholding the standard of ‘respectability.’ Brah notes that “notions of respectability could have the power to control female sexuality through sheer innuendo,” suggesting that a ‘respectable’ woman does not challenge patriarchal norms and supports the husband as the household's head and decision-maker (78). Layla’s silence is vital to maintaining the heterotopic⁹ illusion of the household, where the culture of the homeland is preserved while also encouraging Western assimilation. The effects of this control, and the resulting resentment, will be examined further in chapter two, particularly in discussing love as a mechanism for cultural transplantation. The next chapter will also delve more deeply into the relationship of Ashima and Layla with their children, and of Isma with her siblings, studying the ways of mothering in the diaspora and how the cultural and national feeling of homelessness and disconnection can create a sense of resentment between the generations of diaspora.

⁹ Foucault defines “Heterotopia” as opposite to utopias, as “[p]laces that do exist and that are formed in the very founding of society...something like counter-sites, a kind of effectively enacted utopia in which the real sites, all the other real sites that can be found within the culture, are simultaneously represented, contested, and inverted. Places of this kind are outside of all places, even though it may be possible to indicate their location in reality” (24).

Chapter Two: Mothering & Resentment in Diaspora

Within the diaspora, the success of motherhood is often judged by the child's upbringing, with second-generation immigrants—those born to immigrant parents or who migrated as children—struggling to balance the conflicting demands of loyalty to both their homeland and host culture. This duality often leads to confusion and resentment, frequently directed toward the diasporic mother, who is seen as responsible for upholding cultural traditions while promoting assimilation. Lahiri uses the term ABCD¹⁰ which stands for “American-born confused deshi” to capture this conflict, as seen in Gogol's inability to fully grasp his cultural identity despite understanding his mother tongue: “...although he can understand his mother tongue, and speak it fluently, he cannot read or write it with even modest proficiency” (118). Gogol, the protagonist and Ashima's son in *The Namesake*, hears the term for the first time from panelists at a conference about Indian novels written in English, “...who keep referring to something called ‘marginality,’ as if it were some sort of medical condition” and mention that “...ABCDs are unable to answer the question ‘Where are you from?’” which becomes a source of tension, highlighting the fragmented identity of those caught between cultures (118). However, what Lahiri highlights through Gogol's experience, and Shamsie and Mirza through their characters, is that place of origin for the second-generation diasporic subject can mean multiple locations, or even at the “margins” of various cultures. James Clifford's essay “Diasporas” underscores this tension, noting that diaspora communities create hybrid cultures that resist simple categorization. This fluidity of cultures allows diasporic identities to be multiple and hybrid leading to complex cultural formations that are difficult to categorize. Yet, as this chapter analyzes, the pressure on

¹⁰ “ABCD” has since become a slur used against and by the South Asian Diaspora to imply confusion about cultural identity.

diasporic mothers to raise children who are both loyal to their heritage and fully integrated into the host society often results in a generation confused about their identity, fostering resentment, rebellion, and shame, with the mother frequently bearing the brunt of this conflict. Connecting with the previous chapter's exploration of how the diasporic women come to embody the homeland ideals, this chapter delves deeper into how the role of the diasporic woman as the "mother of the nation" reinforces the mother's responsibility to encourage homeland ideals within the second-generation, while navigating the pressures of integration, leading to an intergenerational rift which creates a sense of displacement and fractured belonging.

To understand the conflicting desires for both assimilation and resistance, it is essential to distinguish between the immigrant narrative, focused on building a new home, and the diasporic narrative, centered on transplanting the homeland. Unlike immigrants who seek acceptance through assimilation, diasporic bodies like Gogol in *The Namesake*, often live on the margins of the two narratives, struggling with a collective memory that ties them to an idealized, often unattainable past. Gogol's rejection of ABCDs as friends, "...for they remind him too much of the way his parents choose to live, befriending people not so much because they like them, but because of the past they happen to share," reflects this internal conflict (119). Despite attempts to assimilate, he realizes he has never fully detached from his family's roots, embodying their marginality (281). Immigrants are "cured" through assimilation, or so Gogol believes, but in diaspora, "[p]eoples whose sense of identity is centrally defined by collective histories of displacement and violent loss cannot be "cured" by merging into a new national community" (Clifford 307). Therefore, the diasporic narrative is shaped by a collective resistance to assimilation and a loss of a sense of belonging from a homeland as in the case of Gogol's parents, whereas the individual immigrant pursues the path of assimilation in order to be

accepted in the host land, which Gogol does by rejecting the diasporic narrative of collective belonging, generating a clash of ideology between the self and the collective.

This resistance to assimilation doesn't necessarily mean successful regeneration of the homeland, since the "ideal" homeland is a space in the past that exists infinitely in the collective memory of the diasporic body. Their resistance to assimilation is focused on regenerating this imagined homeland, "tak[ing] the form [of] claiming another nation that has been lost, elsewhere in space and time, but powerful as a political formation here and now" (Clifford 307). For second-generation immigrants like Gogol, this creates a sense of perpetual marginality, as they grapple with an inherited memory of a homeland that no longer exists, leaving them neither fully accepted in the host land nor connected to the transformed homeland.

For Love's Sake

At the forefront of both immigrant and diasporic narratives is the mother. As the "mother of the nation" and defenders of traditions and culture, which Sallie Westwood talks in detail about in her chapter "Gendering Diaspora: Space, Politics, and South Asian Masculinities in Britain," mothers like Layla and Ashima are expected to be exemplary teachers, facilitating their child's introduction to the values of the "motherland" while also encouraging them to integrate into the West. Any shortcomings in the child's ability to seamlessly transfer between the two leads to the mother being represented as a failure. In Mirza's *A Place for Us*, Layla, a mother of three, finds a secret keepsake box in her son Amar's room that contains love letters and photos exchanged between Amar and their neighbour, Amira Ali. Layla's immediate reaction is to bemoan her son for having fallen prey to Western ideas of love outside marriage, and her consequent failure of having raised her child 'wrong' – for "[h]ow *she failed* to pass on to one

child what was so instilled in the others?” (189, *my emphasis*). It is crucial to look at the phrasing of her self-inflicted image of failure – “[h]ow *she* failed,” the focus is on her failing and not on her son who did not adhere to her cultural practices (*my emphasis*). The use of “failed” indicates a personal judgment and self-blame, highlighting Layla’s inner turmoil about her perceived shortcomings as a mother. She wonders how it was only Amar that *she had failed* to raise with the same ideology whereas she believes her daughters have the “right” ideologies instilled in them, and whether this reflects on her ability to connect with or influence her children in the same way.

This feeling of failure leads to the feeling of shame – the inability to live up to the ideals of the “ideal other.” Ahmed writes, “...we feel shame because we have failed to approximate ‘an ideal’ that has been given to us through the practices of love,” where love becomes the affect in interrogation (*The Cultural Politics* 106). “What is exposed in same is the failure of love,” Ahmed adds, connotating that Layla’s fear about her son’s affair and her consecutive questioning of her failure in raising him are results of shame rooted in her perception that she might have failed to love him the ideal way (*The Cultural Politics* 106). By questioning if she failed in raising him with ideals, she is also questioning if she failed to love him right compared to her other children. The ideal for Layla would be for her son to not have a romantic relationship before marriage, as that is the ideal she was raised with. But even when Layla considers marriage between Amar and Amira, she admits that it would not work “...because Amar was not the kind of man worthy of marrying the Ali girl,” (Mirza 190). She comes to this conclusion without even giving them an opportunity, implying that she was already ashamed of Amar’s lifestyle, and that “Seema and Brother Ali would laugh at the proposal if it were to be sent” (190).

The other aspect of this act of deciding on behalf of Amar without consulting him is also something she has learned through her own upbringing. In chapter one, I discuss Layla's mother's involvement in her marriage by choosing the groom on her behalf. The idea that "mother knows best" is something that she inherits from her own mother and intends to impose in this situation with her son because that is the characteristics of the ideal mother that she was taught. This ties back to Ahmed's argument that love is a means to establish an ideal; Layla's mother used love to establish motherly involvement as an ideal by making decisions about Layla's marriage for her.

The term "halal" is an important concept to consider when thinking about shame within diaspora. "Halal" is an Arabic word that literally translates to "permissible," and the concept of "halal" plays an important role within the Muslim diaspora. Often relating to a religious framework, "permissibility" has a crucial role in sustaining the diasporic narrative of honoring the homeland ideals for South Asian diasporas of all religions. When considering halal together with the concept of 'haram', another Arabic word literally meaning "forbidden", there are two layers of shame to consider – the religious and the social. For Layla, Amar and Amira's relationship is haram not only in the consideration of religious laws, but also socially, because the Ali family "would laugh at the proposal" (190). The perceived act of laughter here is connected to shame; Layla is so ashamed that she is already perceiving a future where she would be laughed at and therefore does not even try to advocate for her son's relationship.

The standards from the homeland become a habit and a space of comfort for first-generation immigrant parents, as seen through their use of religion to maintain a sense of familiarity. When Rafiq, Amar's father, finds out about his substance abuse, his initial reaction is focused on the act of sinning as he mentions: "I don't understand how he could sin so severely"

(174). Amar's sister Hadia points out that "[r]ight and wrong, halal and haram—it was her father's only way of experiencing the world," highlighting the diasporic narrative of living by the ideals or the standards of the homeland or the culture of origin in an attempt to reproduce the same standards within the host land. She promptly reminds him that sinning is not the main concern; "...what he is gambling on is not just his standing before God. This is much graver. This is about his surviving *this* life, here" (174, *original emphasis*). Note how Hadia, who also represents second-generation, shifts the narrative away from halal-haram, permitted-forbidden, to a more present concern – Amar's health. The argument here is not that Rafiq does not care about his son's wellbeing, but rather that he associates wellbeing with that of maintaining the perception of halal-haram as per the standards of his homeland culture. Later in the novel, Mirza adds the point of view of Rafiq, who realizes the disconnect between him and Amar, and therefore feels like he has lost control:

What was unfathomable to me was possible to you...I panicked, not knowing what my children were capable of, having been made aware suddenly that the limit of their behavior was nothing my greatest fears could even conjure. We raised them here hoping. Now it was out of our hands. They would do what they liked. Maybe it had always been out of our hands. Maybe anything we could have wanted to instill in them was, at best, a hope. (327)

The sudden realization that his hope of his children adhering to the teachings of their parents, and therefore "doing the right thing" was just a hope, and is now being challenged by his son, shows his how little power he has when it comes to the lives his children lead. For the first-generation diasporic body, in this case Layla and Rafiq, "defying one's parents is a sin" (328) and "God would be pleased...if [they] pleased [their] parents, and [they] would be rewarded,"

(20). However, in the West, his children have more autonomy over their lives, allowing them to make choices for themselves (328). As he later realizes, the disconnect between him and Amar is because his faith had become a habit to him and Layla, something they never questioned, and also wanted their children "...to grow with an awareness of God, with that order and compass and comfort it provided, safe from the dangers [he] could not imagine and could not protect [them] from" (328). However, Amar finds it difficult to accept the idea of an inherent God and a religion to be inherited, constantly separating his faith from that of his "father's God" (75). Faith becomes a place of comfort for first-generation immigrant parents because it is familiar, and any challenges to this consistency disrupt the continuity of life and therefore generate discomfort. Layla and Rafiq believe their children will also find this sense of comfort if they adhere to their faith. Therefore, the concept of permissibility not only allows a means to maintain a religious connection to faith but also allows immigrants like Rafiq and Layla to sustain their "habit" and therefore regenerate the feeling of homeland.

American Born Confused Desi

Because the West allows the children more autonomy than the immigrant parents are used to within the South Asian context, there is a disconnect between the generations that is evident in the parent-child relationship in the diaspora. Unlike the parents, for whom faith and values are something not to be questioned, the children grow up with much more sense of freedom and are not afraid to challenge these values and faiths that do not fit into their worldview. This is especially evident in *The Namesake* when Gogol tries to change his name. Unbeknownst to Gogol, who thinks he was named after author Nikolai Gogol, his father names him as a homage to a traumatic near-death accident where he survives by luck. The issue of name arises from a concept of *daknam* or pet name, a very common concept in Bengali culture,

“the name by which one is called, by friends, family, and other intimates, at home and in other private, unguarded moments” (26). In America, the concept of *daknam* doesn’t exist, creating confusion for Gogol as a child. When he was born, his great grandmother in India was supposed to name him and had posted a letter with the name in it. However, the letter with the name was lost in the mail, and with the grandmother too old to remember even Ashima, Gogol was left without a *bhalonam* or “good name”. When the doctor advises the parents to name the child after themselves, they are unhappy with this suggestion,

This tradition doesn't exist for Bengalis, naming a son after father or grandfather, a daughter after mother or grandmother. This sign of respect in America and Europe, this symbol of heritage and lineage, would be ridiculed in India. Within Bengali families, individual names are sacred, inviolable. They are not meant to be inherited or shared.

(28)

This highlights how names are considered sacred and unique to each person within the Bengali tradition, something that they not only carry for the rest of their life, but something that also defines the person.

In elementary school, Gogol only responds to his *daknam* since everyone around him uses it. When his parents try to introduce his *bhalonam*—Nikhil—he fails to recognize it and doesn’t respond. His American teacher, perplexed by the distinction between the names, eventually decides to call him by his *daknam* Gogol, respecting “their son’s preference” (60) and informing his parents accordingly. This decision, however, leaves Ashima and Ashoke dissatisfied, wondering, “[w]hat about the parents’ preference?” (60). The question reflects Ashima and Ashoke's frustration and sense of powerlessness in the face of cultural conflict.

Their question underscores the tension between their desire to uphold Bengali traditions and the pressures of adapting to American norms. By prioritizing Gogol's preference for his pet name, the school disregards the significance of the *bhalonam* in Bengali culture, which traditionally carries deep respect and formality. The quote also highlights the parents' struggle to assert their cultural identity within a foreign environment that often overlooks or misunderstands their values. Their rhetorical question expresses a broader concern about losing control over their child's cultural upbringing and the erosion of their authority and traditions in the diaspora.

As he grows up and starts to associate his name Gogol with the author Nikolai Gogol, he starts to detest the name, unaware of its deep meaning for Ashoke. In a *Readers Digest* he reads about famous personalities, “[t]hey had all renamed themselves...it was a right belonging to every American citizen...All it took was a legal petition...And suddenly he envisioned ‘Gogol’ added to the list of names, ‘Nikhil’ printed in tiny letters upside down” (98-99). However, his parents are not happy with this decision to change his name, urging that it is too complicated, and that he is too old now. They emphasize that having a pet name is “...what Bengalis do” but that because the concept is uncommon in the West, his pet name has become his legal name (99). Gogol deciding to change his name as soon as he is old enough is an authoritative challenge to his parents, for whom it is not culturally common for children to make such life-changing decisions on their own. It is also challenging for his parents to digest this concept of name change because the name “Gogol” had become associated with their homeland ties – Ashoke’s accident, Ashima’s grandmother, and the comfort of pet names. Naming children is often a way to remain attached to the homeland, especially in the diaspora (Magen 1571). Even though Gogol’s name is not Bengali or even Indian, the idea of the name attaches his parents to a past in the homeland.

Moreover, the differing expectations placed on children—whether viewed through an individual lens or a diasporic narrative—create confusion and identity crises. This tension is encapsulated in terms like ABCD (American Born Confused Desi), which underscore a sense of “marginality.” In the introduction to his book *Nation and Migration: The Politics of Space in the South Asian Diaspora* (1995), Peter van der Veer writes,

The marginal position of the migrant, and the special qualities of group formation among exiles, seem in general to play a significant role in the formulation of nationalist discourse. Although this may already be the case with the “Westernized” intellectual who becomes marginal to both his or her own culture and the colonial culture, it is even stronger when such a Western-educated person has a vivid migrant experience. To see one’s society from the outside with the eyes of “the other,” yet still experience a marginality and strangeness that is enhanced by colonial discrimination, leads to bold personal transformations which may have paradigmatic significance for the society at large. (4)

Peter van der Veer’s quote highlights how the migrant’s marginal position—alienated from both their native and host cultures—plays a significant role in shaping diasporic discourse. This marginality forces migrants to view their societies as outsiders, leading to personal transformations that can influence broader societal narratives. Essentially, the migrant’s dual alienation fosters a unique perspective that challenges and reshapes national and cultural identities.

Characters like Gogol and Amar, or even Anika and Parvaiz in *Home Fire*, are visibly marginalized in both the West and even within their own homeland communities in the diaspora,

unable to fit in. They become an outsider, “the other”, in both communities. Their hybridity allows the community to easily own or disown them as convenient, as seen in Shamsie’s *Home Fire*. Karamat Lone, the home minister in Britain, himself being of Pakistani descent, uses policies like revoking “...citizenship of all dual nationals who have left Britain to join our enemies,” and advocates that “citizenship is a privilege not a right or a birthright” (134, 143). This illustrates the precarious position of marginalized bodies highlighting the vulnerability of individuals with hybrid identities, belonging to both the diaspora and the West yet fully accepted by neither. By framing citizenship as a conditional privilege rather than an inherent right, Karamat Lone reinforces the idea that those with dual identities can be easily embraced or rejected based on convenience, reflecting the fluid and often tenuous nature of their belonging. This amplifies the already existing insecurity, suggesting that their inclusion in the national fabric is contingent and revocable, especially for those whose loyalties might be questioned due to their background which is visible in Isma’s interrogation at the British immigration as explored in chapter one (1-4).

Mother’s Fault

Given this context of a generation with confused, marginal identities, the question arises: why is the mother often held responsible for the child’s identity confusion and targeted with resentment, as depicted in these novels? Avtar Brah argues that, unlike “European orientalist ideologies which construct Asian women as ‘passive’,” the construction of diasporic women as “mother of the nation” means that women’s roles are more active (69). As “mothers of the nation” and preserver of traditions and culture, diasporic mothers are burdened with the responsibility of raising their children with the values of the homeland while also encouraging their assimilation into the West, a dual role towards family, which Westwood argues is often

fused with national loyalty. Because responsibility is gendered, that is, women as “mothers of the nation” and men as “defenders of the nation,” mothers are scrutinized based on how the children are raised and how well they are able to move between the hybrid identities. When the children fail to embody either the homeland or the host country, it is the mother who is questioned, a phenomenon known as “Mother-Blame,” “...the phenomenon of mothers being held accountable for their children's actions and wellbeing, and their own perceived flaws” (Laurin 225).

This pressure is evident in Layla’s constant fear of being questioned about Amar’s whereabouts, which she interprets as a failure to uphold the family’s reputation. In her efforts to maintain an image of perfection, Layla donates *sadaqa* money, hoping “...to protect from any comment about her son’s return in a tone that could threaten its undoing” (4). This reflects her attempt to shield the family from shame and herself from self-blame for failing to present a flawless family. Even when she learns about Amar and Amira’s relationship, Layla deflects blame from Amar by saying things like, “I’ve never known a girl to have such little *sharam*¹¹” and “boys will be boys...especially in the face of temptation,” while knowing these statements are unjust and cruel (192-193). Similarly, Isma, in Shamsie’s *Home Fire*, tries to protect Anika by stating, “[b]oys are different from us...they see what they want through tunnel vision,” highlighting how both Layla and Isma, as diasporic mothers, are caught in a web of expectations, compelled to safeguard their children while simultaneously navigating the complex and often conflicting cultural demands placed upon them (19). These actions underscore how maternal figures are expected to uphold a standard of perfection and bear the burden of blame when their children fail to conform to either cultural ideal.

¹¹ Shame

Ashima's incorporation of American holidays and foods into her family traditions serves as a way to help her children embrace a hybrid identity, challenging the stereotype that Asian parents are overly restrictive. Brah critiques this culturalist perspective, stating,

Asian parents tend to be portrayed as 'authoritarian', 'conservative' and supposedly 'opposed to the liberating influence of schools'. But there is as much variation among Asian parents on issues concerning the education of their children as can be expected in any other group of parents. There are many problems with 'culturalist explanations', not least that they can have the effect of blaming the subordinate group as well as providing legitimacy to the ideology which claims the superiority of Western cultural practices over non Western ones. (Brah 80)

Rather than rigidly transplanting homeland culture, Ashima and Ashoke embrace aspects of American culture for the benefit of their children. For instance, they celebrate "...with progressively increasing fanfare, the birth of Christ, an event the children look forward to far more than the worship of Durga and Saraswati," illustrating their willingness to cultivate a hybrid identity for Gogol and Sonia (64). This flexibility suggests they hope such gestures will ease their children's acceptance into American society. While "Ashima continues to wear nothing but saris," the rest of the family gradually adapts to American ways: "Ashoke, accustomed to wearing tailor-made pants and shirts all his life, learns to buy ready-made. He trades in fountain pens for ballpoints, Wilkinson blades and his boar-bristled shaving brush for Bic razors bought six to a pack" (65). The children are given the freedom to acclimatize not only through traditions but also through their eating habits –

In the supermarket they let Gogol fill the cart with items that he and Sonia, but not they, consume: individually wrapped slices of cheese, mayonnaise, tuna fish, hot dogs. For Gogol's lunches they stand at the deli to buy cold cuts, and in the mornings Ashima makes sandwiches with bologna or roast beef. At his insistence, 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)

Although the novel portrays Ashima and Ashoke as partners in raising their children, it becomes evident that Ashima is primarily expected to maintain the balance between the two cultures. It is she who “concedes” to making American food for the children, but only once a week, to prevent them from completely forgetting their roots. While Ashoke gradually adapts to the host culture, Ashima continues to embody the homeland by wearing saris, reflecting her attempt to preserve cultural identity. She continues to feel like a stranger in America even after living here for years, since it was never her dream to live in America. Reem Nasser Al-Aulaqi writes, “[s]he was there only because her husband had his dreams there...She felt so alone and isolated and would cry over little things which would remind her of her homeland...she thought of going back to India to raise her children there but her husband refused because he felt that America had best opportunities and chances for their children” (65).

This dynamic reveals that the mother is often expected to remain the custodian of homeland traditions while the rest of the family assimilates, creating a sense of isolation for her within the host land, “...because those women never felt like seeking help from others or even sharing their feelings with people around them” (Al-Aulaqi 67). While the phrase “felt like” might not be entirely correct, South Asian women are indeed trained to keep their emotions to themselves, and therefore, often self-isolate to avoid appearing as complaining or ungrateful. The

gap between the mother and her children widens as the children interpret her commitment to tradition as stubbornness or failure. For example, Hadia “...hated... [h]er mother, who turned against her own children just to stand by her husband,” unable to understand the cultural values that taught her mother to support her husband's choices as an act of fidelity to the homeland (56-57). The phrase “turned against her own children” underscores a sense of betrayal and emotional alienation. Hadia’s inability to understand her mother’s actions, and Layla’s inability to look beyond the cultural expectations, points to a deeper generational and cultural divide; Hadia interprets her mother’s unwavering fidelity to her father—and by extension, to cultural norms—as a personal affront, rather than recognizing it as adherence to cultural values rooted in the mother’s identity and upbringing. This conflict reveals the tensions experienced by second-generation immigrants, who often struggle to reconcile their parents’ traditional values with their own perspectives shaped by life in the diaspora.

Resentment Over Reconciliation

Even when the mother attempts to protect her children from the scrutiny of the West, as Isma does by coming clean about Parvaiz to protect Anika, she is met with resentment. Isma’s decision to reveal information about Parvaiz to the authorities, ostensibly to protect Anika, is portrayed as an act of maternal responsibility—an effort to shield her family from the scrutiny and suspicion of the West. Isma’s explanation that they are “...in no position to let the state question [their] loyalties” highlights her awareness of their precarious position as diasporic bodies, where even perceived disloyalty can have dire consequences (Shamsie 30). Her cooperation with the authorities, despite the state’s role in preventing her brother from returning, is framed as a necessary compromise to ensure Anika’s safety. However, Anika interprets Isma’s actions as a betrayal, severing their relationship in response. This reaction underscores the

generational and ideological rift between them; while Isma operates from a pragmatic stance shaped by the realities of diasporic life, Anika views her actions through the lens of personal and familial loyalty. Anika cutting off Isma from her life captures the painful irony that, despite Isma's efforts to protect her family, she ends up alienating the very person she seeks to safeguard.

The children's rejection of their familial ties manifests in both overt and subtle ways. Anika's decision to sever all connections with Isma is a stark example, whereas Gogol's avoidance of anything that reminds him of his parents is a quieter form of resistance. Gogol's choices reflect his desire to escape the cultural and emotional weight of his heritage:

He didn't want to attend his father's alma mater, and live in an apartment in Central Square as his parents once had, and revisit the streets about which his parents speak nostalgically. He didn't want to go home on the weekends, to go with them to pujos and Bengali parties, to remain unquestionably in their world. He prefers New York, a place which his parents do not know well, whose beauty they are blind to, which they fear.

(Lahiri 126)

Gogol's yearning for a space untouched by his parents' experiences represents his broader struggle to carve out an independent identity, separate from the cultural narrative imposed by his family. "[I]n willing exile from his own life," and by distancing himself from his parents, "[h]e feels free of expectation, of responsibility," (142). In seeking this "willing exile," Gogol embodies the tension between belonging and alienation, demonstrating how his pursuit of self-identity requires a conscious severance from his roots. This captures Gogol's desire to distance himself from his family's world of traditions and memories of their Bengali heritage. His refusal

to attend his father's alma mater, live in the same neighborhood, or participate in cultural events symbolizes a deliberate rejection of the path his parents have laid out for him. Gogol perceives these spaces—filled with Bengali customs, rituals, and nostalgia—as confining and representative of a life he feels pressured to embrace.

It is this pressure to conform to the imaginary “ideal” diasporic subject—a balancing act between two cultures that often feels impossible—that drives the children further from both the mother and the homeland she represents. The mother's steadfast adherence to the cultural values of her origin, coupled with her wariness of the West's superficial inclusivity, creates a chasm between her and her children. They perceive her resistance to fully embracing the Western way of life as a barrier to their own integration and acceptance. In their pursuit of self-identity, the children see their mother's choices as symbolic of the constraints of their heritage, prompting them to seek autonomy by rejecting the very traditions and familial ties she embodies. Thus, the children's actions reveal the complexities of identity formation in the diaspora, where the pull between heritage and assimilation often leads to conflict, estrangement, and the quest for a new sense of belonging.

Coda: Affect Beyond Resentment

“Having been deprived of the company of her own parents upon moving to America, her children's independence, their need to keep their distance from her, is something she will never understand. Still, she had not argued with them. This, too, she is beginning to learn. She had complained to her friends at the library, and they had told her it was inevitable, that eventually parents had to stop assuming that their children would return faithfully for the holidays.”

— Jhumpa Lahiri, *The Namesake*

Narratives of diasporic motherhood often present the mother as a single, solitary unit, tirelessly attempting to bridge a gap between the second-generation's diasporic identity and her homeland. This narrative often dissociates from the mother's identity as a sovereign being, a woman with her own desires, aspirations, and individuality. It places the mother's existence in relation to her children, reducing her to a mere vessel of cultural continuity and a caretaker bound by the expectations of both the homeland and the host society. A close analysis of the diasporic maternal narratives embodied by the characters of Ashima, Layla, and Isma, and their relationships with their children (or siblings, in the case of Isma), reveals the profound isolation of motherhood within the diasporic condition.

In this thesis, I explore the ways this narrative of the mother as the representative of the nation leads to a sense of resentment in the second generation towards the mother and the homeland she represents. I attempt to bridge the diverse maternal narratives – Ashima's optimism in *The Namesake*, Layla's fear in *A Place for Us*, and Isma's insecurity in *Home Fire* – to highlighting the common thread of love and suffering as represented in the novels. My aim is

to humanize maternal figures, moving beyond their prescribed roles as “mother of the nation” (Westwood 199) and grounding their experiences in affect. As Derrida notes, maternal identity has “...always been a matter of interpretation, of social construction” (27), contingent upon “the presence of an other: the child” (Knorr 6). However, these interpretations often strip away the emotional complexities of motherhood, reducing the mother to a material figure whose primary role is to shape the child into the ideal diasporic subject. When the child inevitably struggles to balance the conflicting demands of homeland ideals and the host society’s expectations, the mother, as a representative of the homeland, becomes the target of their resentment. Because the maternal identity is so tightly bound to the presence of the child, this emotional and physical distancing leaves diasporic mothers isolated, navigating a foreign and often unwelcoming land without the support of the very children for whom they have sacrificed.

Even with the formation of diaspora clusters that serve a communal function, these mothers remain fundamentally isolated, navigating their fears of failure within both the diasporic sphere and the host society. This isolation is intensified by their dual mandate: to preserve and transmit the cultural ideals of the homeland while simultaneously fostering their children’s assimilation into a host society that often marginalizes them. This carries a tragic irony: in their efforts to maintain a connection to the homeland and fulfill their role as custodians of an imagined national identity, these mothers become targets of resentment from their children, who perceive them as barriers to their own sense of belonging and acceptance within the host culture. Ahmed’s *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* is pivotal for this thesis; instead of the diasporic versus national subject narrative that Ahmed explores in her text, this thesis uses Ahmed’s analysis of emotions to study the resentment and isolation *within* the diaspora.

Witnessing this disproportionately represented narrative allows for motherhood to be understood through emotional dynamics, encouraging interpretations of mothers as autonomous beings beyond their relational identities. Of the three novels analyzed in this thesis, Lahiri's *The Namesake* most directly challenges the narrative of maternal self-sacrifice. Ashima, whose name signifies "she who is limitless, without borders," ultimately makes a choice for herself by deciding to divide her time between the two countries she considers home, acknowledging that neither place remains wholly her own (Lahiri 26). Mirza's novel leaves Layla in an eternal limbo of motherhood, her success and failure measured by those of her children, whereas Shamsie's *Home Fire* ends with a narrative that seems to have forgotten Isma altogether. Both Mirza and Shamsie's maternal narratives fall short by limiting the stories of Layla and Isma within their maternal roles, and not extending beyond, a narrative that overshadows their affective experience as diasporic women. The study of the novels demands a reframing of maternal narratives within the diaspora, moving beyond the mother as merely a representative of the homeland, to viewing her as a diasporic body experiencing the emotional impact of displacement.

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