

UNEARTHING THE DIASPORIC *BHADRAMAHILA* IN JHUMPA LAHIRI'S  
*UNACCUSTOMED EARTH* AND BHARATI MUKHERJEE'S *DESIRABLE DAUGHTERS*

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Received: 31-10-2023

Accepted: 11-02-2024



**ABSTRACT**

This study aims to examine the influence of the *bhadramahila* construct both in the Bengal colonial context and its reproduction in the imaginary of the Indian American family dynamics. The works under discussion are: Jhumpa Lahiri's short story anthology *Unaccustomed Earth* (2008) and Bharati Mukherjee's novel *Desirable Daughters* (2002). Both give evidence to the academic discussions on the position of the *bhadralok* and *bhadramahila* in Bengal (India) during colonial times, a rare topic in both Lahiri's and Mukherjee's stories. The article puts into perspective the making of the "New Woman" in Bengal in the nineteenth century, then moves to the literary section where it analyses how female characters reproduce their cultural baggage in a hybrid setting and deal with inner conflicts, hence inaugurating the figure of the diasporic *bhadramahila* in the context of the United States.

**KEYWORDS:** Jhumpa Lahiri; *Unaccustomed Earth*; Bharati Mukherjee; *Desirable Daughters*; diasporic *bhadramahila*; Bengal; nineteenth century.

**RESUMEN:** *Desenterrar a la bhadramahila de la diáspora en Unaccustomed Earth de Jhumpa Lahiri y Desirable Daughters de Bharati Mukherjee*

Este estudio examina la influencia de la *bhadramahila* en el contexto colonial de la región de Bengala (India) y la reproducción en el imaginario de las dinámicas de la familia india en Estados Unidos en la antología de narraciones breves *Unaccustomed Earth* (2008) de Jhumpa Lahiri y en la novela *Desirable Daughters* (2002) de Bharati Mukherjee. Ambos textos demuestran los debates en el mundo académico sobre la posición de *bhadralok* y *bhadramahila* en Bengala (India) durante el colonialismo, un tema poco estudiado en relación a las historias de Lahiri y Mukherjee. El artículo pone en perspectiva la creación de la "New Woman" en la región de Bengala en el siglo diecinueve, para continuar después con la sección literaria donde se incide en cómo los personajes femeninos reproducen el bagaje cultural en un entorno híbrido y lidian con conflictos internos, dando lugar a la figura de *bhadramahila* en el contexto de la diáspora a Estados Unidos.

**PALABRAS CLAVE:** Jhumpa Lahiri; *Unaccustomed Earth*; Bharati Mukherjee; *Desirable Daughters*; *bhadramahila* de la diáspora; Bengala; siglo diecinueve.

## Introduction

According to the UN World Migration Report, in 2020, there were approximately 281 million immigrants worldwide. These global migratory movements are either creating new diasporas or joining existing ones, like the South Asian (which comprises a few countries) or the Indian diaspora, which refers to the Indian subcontinent. The Indian diaspora, as asserted by Brij V. Lal and Knut A. Jacobsen in *The Routledge Handbook of Contemporary India* (2016), “is an extremely diverse and plural phenomenon. It is divided not only into old and new, once and twice migrant diaspora communities, and a large number of regional and linguistic cultures, but also into a number of different religious traditions and identities as well” (2016: 167). Avtar Brah (1996, 2022) studies diaspora from “an intersectional feminist optic” (2022: 109); hence the space where diasporic individuals are located is explained in her well-known book *Cartographies of Diaspora: Contesting Identities* (1996):

Diaspora space is the intersectionality of diaspora, border, and dis/location as a point of confluence of economic, political, cultural, and psychic processes. It is where multiple subject positions are juxtaposed, contested, proclaimed or disavowed; where the permitted and the prohibited perpetually interrogate; and where the accepted and the transgressive imperceptibly mingle even while these syncretic forms may be disclaimed in the name of purity and tradition. Here tradition is itself continually invented even as it may be hailed as originating from the mists of time. What is at stake is the infinite experientiality, the myriad processes of cultural fissure and fusion that underwrite contemporary forms of transcultural identities (1996: 181).

From this perspective, it is important to shed some light on the complex configurations of identity when it derives from socio-historical accounts. The two authors studied, Jhumpa Lahiri and Bharati Mukherjee, keep cultural, social, and personal ties to the region of Bengal, not only because they or their families were part of the Bengali upper-middle class but also because their stories show interest in understanding the unbreakable anxiety that exists in their characters towards their homeland, India and their region (Bengal). This article studies the confluence of experiences related to cross-cultural migration in the United States, and the impact on diasporic female identities in an anthology of short stories, *Unaccustomed Earth* (2008) by Jhumpa Lahiri and *Desirable Daughters* (2002), a novel written as part of a trilogy and authored by Bharati Mukherjee. These authors highly diverge in their interpretation of female migration or their focus of interest. Whilst Jhumpa Lahiri has consistently devoted a substantial part of her writing production to second generations, Bharati Mukherjee's writing

style has focused on the problems of first-generation migrants, for example idealistic assimilation into American society. In an essay entitled “On Being an American Writer”, Bharati Mukherjee asserted that “I came to a profound conclusion. I was no longer Indian in mind or spirit. The weight of tradition, even the multifarious tyrannies of a loving family, was no longer tolerable to me” (2008).

As previously mentioned, the complex configurations of identity are to be understood from a socio-historical account. For example, through references to the Bengal Renaissance in the nineteenth century, but most precisely in Calcutta (now Kolkatta), though this entailed changes that echoed in the rest of the country (Dasgupta, 2011: 431). The impact of this movement could be compared with the influence of Italy in the European Renaissance (Sarkar, 1985: 13). The Bengal Renaissance refers to the “broad movement [...] which looked outward to European ideas through the English language, and inward to the Hindu tradition through Sanskrit and Bengali” (Killingley, 2019: 36). It witnessed the blossoming of an intellectual revolution, the prose and literature blossomed and with it, the situation of women progressively improved (Borthwick, 1984).

Although much has been written on the Bengal Renaissance (Dasgupta, 2011) and the constructs of the *bhadralok* and *bhadramahila*, especially by Partha Chatterjee (1993), there exists a gap in the literature that needs to be filled. Little has been written on these constructs applied to literary works. A first approximation was made in the book *Reading Jhumpa Lahiri: Women, Domesticity and the Indian American Diaspora* (2022), where Nilanjana Chatterjee came up with the denomination “Indian American *bhadramahila*”, but a comparative analysis enables us to see that other authors also bear in mind the importance of history and the fact that women engaged in migration carry it with them.

## **1.- Jhumpa Lahiri and Bharati Mukherjee’s socio-literary context**

The chosen writers for this paper have their origins in common, as they keep geographical, social, and cultural ties with Bengal as their own, or their parents’ place of birth. Jhumpa Lahiri was born in London (to Bengali parents) and then moved to the United States early in her life, first to Boston for a year and then to Rhode Island. Her literary focus is on the ethnic experiences of highly educated or middle-class Bengalis and their offspring, all living in New England since the 1970s (Dhingra, 2012: xi).

After a long rejection period, she debuted her literary career in 1999 with an anthology of short stories entitled *Interpreters of Maladies*, winning the Pulitzer Prize a year later. Consequently, she was named one of the twenty most influential young American writers of the new century by *The New Yorker* and “since the Pulitzer, her book has become a bestseller and has made its way into public/college libraries, book clubs, and even college classrooms” (Huang, 2003: 126). On the contrary, Bharati Mukherjee’s migration experience occurred much later in her life when she moved to the United States to pursue postgraduate studies at the University of Iowa. Three main phases can be recognized in her writing, as Nagendra Kumar depicts in *The Fiction of Bharati Mukherjee: A Cultural Perspective* (2001): a phase of expatriation, a phase of transition and a phase of immigration. When she arrived in the United States from India, her writing developed a “deep and persistent undercurrent of nostalgia almost sensual in character for the sights, smells, tastes [...]” (Kakar, 1978: 13) for her native country. This was followed by a period of misery and marginalisation when staying in Canada. Finally, the last stage represented her return to the United States. Overall, she experienced various fluid identities that varied from the expatriate and the immigrant to the assimilated citizen. After a few decades when her writing focused on Americanness, in the 2000s, she returned to her Indian roots, notably her Bengali heritage (Maxey, 2019: 97). Hybridisation is common in authors whose life experiences of migration have revolved around immigration. The work of Jhumpa Lahiri also expresses the sufferings of migrants and the struggles of generations, and her own life has been a constant struggle to find her true identity between the Indian roots of her parents, her American upbringing and the continuous search for beauty, which translates into her life in Italy.

Both writers share respective Indian cultural roots, and, in Lahiri’s work the struggle to break away from their ancestors’ culture due to personal circumstances, such as marriage, jobs or location. Nonetheless, the roots of their struggles depend on their time and circumstances. Bharati Mukherjee’s literary production revolves around first-generation immigrants, and even when she depicts American-born characters, she relates how their lives have been affected by first-generation immigrants. On the other hand, Jhumpa Lahiri turns her attention not only to first generations but especially to second generations, which specifically is her case. Indeed, *Unaccustomed Earth* (2008) gathers second-generation characters who have abandoned their

heritage, hence their parents' values and customs, resulting from a different lifestyle (Ibarrola-Armendariz, 2011: 47). Even though *Desirable Daughters* and *Unaccustomed Earth* subscribe to the notions of immigration posited by both authors, the subtext tells another story: that the female diasporic experience is far more complex than thought, as women perform a more significant role in the diaspora than was recently conceived when they were believed to be no more than spouses (Clifford, 1994: 313).

## 2.- The *bhadramahila* in colonial Bengal

The domestic spaces, embodied by South Asian women, are remnants of an imperial past but they also helped shape concepts such as identity or nationalism. The memories of a lost India are also reimagined through the material and imaginative contours of the domestic space. The house space is “more nuanced compared to nondiasporic house as diasporic house space accumulates linguistic, cultural, metaphorical, aesthetic, and ideological metamorphoses caused by territorial dislocation or/and relocation” (Nilanjana, 2022: 1). Both in Lahiri and Mukherjee's works, the implications of the diasporic house translate into the construct of the diasporic *bhadramahila*, a construct which, despite its historical meaning, is visible in the nuances of the female characters, especially first-generations, as regards their domestic space. To understand its literary dimensions, the following section will highlight the complexities of the *bhadramahila* construction in colonial Bengal in the nineteenth century.

The *bhadramahila* construct originated in colonial Bengal during the nineteenth century. At that time, Bengali society was divided into *bhadralok* (meaning “respectable men”) and *chhtolok* (meaning “respectable women”). The kind of *bhadralok* that instilled change was the *grihasta* or *madhyabitta bhadralok*, a middle-income group characterised by their English education and professional occupations (Dharampal-Frick et al., 2015: 21), but also their avid interest in cultural manifestations like the novel or the theatre. Their female kin, the *bhadramahila*, equally took part in the movement. Both the *bhadralok* and the *bhadramahila* were the result of social reform, defined as “an entangled operation of reinterpreting sacred scripture and new state legislation” (Sarkar, 2017: 27). It was a set of operations from colonial rule whose objective was to administer changes in the core of imperial India.

Nonetheless, as Sumit Sarkar informs us, the interest of the reformers did not arise from a particular concern for women's welfare and liberalism but was an expression of "acute problems of interpersonal adjustments with the family" and "social ostracism and isolation" (Sarkar, 1985: 152-172). Extended families based their hierarchy on age, which undermined men's relationships with their wives, particularly in Bengal (Walsh, 2007: 51). Reforms intended to construct a more intimate relationship between husbands and wives so that, as Judith Walsh posits, women's "morality, conduct, attitudes adjusted to their husbands; their aim in life, the satisfaction and pleasure of their husband" (Walsh, 2007: 52).

Two issues dominated the women's question debates: the first regarding upper-caste Hindu widows, the second, a preoccupation with the education of women and the rising middle class that embodied "new codes of morality, new formation of the home as the insulated private sphere, a new codification of customary law" (Chaudhuri, 2015: 12). This also included sensitive topics like childhood marriage or *sati*. The concept of *patrivata*, or "perfect wife", was redefined by new circumstances. Some changes made women more aware of themselves, resulting in a more meaningful life. Firstly, educated women began to acquire a public voice as they took part in women's organisations and progressively, more women took up writing. The reformed woman was also imbued with significant aspects of Victorianism, such as domesticity, family and respectability (Chaudhuri, 2015: 17).

Indeed it was the role of education that profoundly changed women. Even though the entry of women into the formal education system would not take place until the mid-nineteenth century, it would not be until the mid-twentieth century that it gained further acceptance in society (Desai and Thakka, 2001: 47). Opening the access to educational centres and social institutions raised the number of women who could be instructed in various skills (sometimes at home and then sent to an educational institution). Undoubtedly, consciousness awareness helped eradicate specific problems such as child marriage, which was sometimes delayed. It also significantly impacted motherhood and child-rearing since schools often provided motherhood training, as "in all societies in which women are primarily responsible for child-rearing, they have a formative influence on the child's mind and body" (Borthwick, 1984: 64). At the same time, women became more aware of the importance of educating their progeny, which was the real purpose of educating them, not for their own sake but for others.

Despite these changes that made women more visible and outspoken in some circumstances, when reading the label “the new Indian Woman”, it was not a stereotypical female from the Indian subcontinent, depicted as quarrelsome, sexually promiscuous, loud or subjected to male violence (Chatterjee, 1989: 627), but rather “the Westernised, modern woman who was to be modelled on the pattern of the English (read Victorian) woman” (Sen, 2001: 15). Tanika Sarkar cites some examples in her article “Nationalist Iconography: Image of Women in the 19th Century Bengali Literature” (1987). She posits that for some more traditional realms of society, the female domain was the only pure and unpolluted space of Indian tradition; thus, they strongly opposed granting women new rights and access to education because they feared that women would abandon what was truly feminine (Sarkar, 1987: 2014).

This “New Woman” also resulted from a model of “femininity” in the twentieth century, the stereotypical female geared to the needs of Indian nationalism. A vital dichotomy to preserve that femininity was the home/world, which opposed the feminine to the masculine or the material vs the spiritual; these controversies played a fundamental role in the nineteenth century. The home was, as Partha Chatterjee asserts, the site where the spiritual quality of the national culture was expressed; hence, not losing that quality meant not degrading these women’s uniqueness: their femininity (Chatterjee, 1993: 126). That was the principle of difference by which nationalism resolved the woman’s question, which was based on the *bhadramahila* (“respectable woman”) acquiring cultural refinement through education without jeopardising their place at home (Chaudhuri, 2015: 30) but trying not to become *memsahibs* (Chatterjee, 1993: 128).

How nationalism<sup>1</sup> resolved these everyday matters concerning education, women outside and inside the home, or their manners in society, is vital to understanding this “New Woman”. This modern woman was subjected to a new patriarchy, one different from the West but also distinct from tradition (Chatterjee, 1999: 244). Therefore, to address how women should concern themselves with the matters of everyday life, a few solutions were drawn, “a reconstructed ‘classical’ tradition, modernized folk forms, [...] the legal idea of equality in a liberal

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<sup>1</sup> It was in the 1920s when a redefinition of the identity in the region of Bengal began, which involved rethinking Indian nationalism, so it could be compatible with Bengali patriotism. Then, a strengthening of Bengal’s regional identity consciousness, based on its language, identity and culture took place (Bhattacharya, 2014: 2).

democratic state” (Chatterjee, 1999: 244). The antithesis of a commoner, she would possess the most outstanding qualities, becoming a sort of *pativrata*. Moreover she would embody the refined virtues of self-giving, abstinent and generous traditional Hindu women intertwined with the role of a companion of the Victorian lady (Banerjee, 2010: 462).

Besides, this national identity became the response to modernity, the domestic being the terrain where Indianness, otherwise called modernity, came into being. This national culture or identity had women as their harbingers, and, in the Bengal region, progressives and conservatives believed that learned women would improve the physical and mental health of future generations. Besides, “while conservatives believed that educated women would uphold the values of traditional Hindu society, progressives hoped that they would use their influence to bring about social change” (Borthwick, 1984: 68). A common thread between eighteenth-century England and nineteenth-century Bengal was the continuous publication of conduct norms concerning domestic spaces (Bandopadhyay, 2021: 4), whose purpose was no other than to “form a dialogue between husband and wife in which the husband instructed the wife on proper conduct” (Walsh, 2007: 36). This created new patriarchies; therefore, the discourses regarding women’s education and independence served to legitimise women as *pativratas* and *bhadramahilas* so that husbands could be more pleased, but in the nineteenth-century style (Walsh, 2007: 44).

In the context of transnational migration movements, the feminisation of migrations has acquired progressive importance, allowing a better comprehension of the diaspora phenomenon (Knott & McLoughlin, 2010: 118). The following section approaches how the diaspora is understood in its literary dimension. It explores how Indian women from the stories analysed cope with the distressing reality of moving to the United States and, mainly, how the past is present in their relationship with their social environment. It will examine how the characteristics of *bhadramahilas* from the nineteenth century are analogous to some of the behaviours shown by female characters because, after all, they are the daughters or granddaughters of *bhadramahilas*. It therefore makes sense that they carry with them a piece of socio-cultural baggage.



### 3.- Negotiating the diasporic *bhadramahila* in *Unaccustomed Earth*

*Unaccustomed Earth* (2008) is a short story anthology that portrays an amalgam of characters and stories, all “assembled through an invisible history of simultaneous displacement and relocation” (Chatterjee, 2022: 94). It consists of a cluster of middle-class normative Bengali families from varied cultural backgrounds, who “as a result of different circumstances – the job they do, the person they’ve married, the place they live in or the company they keep –, are seen to give up many of the customs that have governed their parents’ lives” (Ibarrola-Armendáriz, 2011: 166). The two stories from *Unaccustomed Earth* (2008) to be discussed to are “Hell-Heaven” and “Once in a Lifetime”. What is common to both stories is that the female characters considered for the analysis are supporting characters and do not lead the story’s plot. Both stories reveal how Jhumpa Lahiri depicts first-generation diaspora women in America as being rather ‘idle’ or inactive.

“Hell-Heaven” is a story of Bengali migrants who enter an arranged marriage in India and move to Berlin before moving again to Massachusetts. At that point, Aparna’s role as an Indian American is that of *bhadramahila*. While living in Germany, she performs the two roles imposed by that construct within her ethnic community: motherhood and household management. Alternatively, as Nilanjana Chatterjee asserts, “she performs the role of a reproductive machine and a sex object within the putative house temple” (Chatterjee, 2022: 95). For first-generation women, the experience of diaspora is about reenacting attitudes from their homeland. Besides, as noted by Adriana Elena Stoican, in Jhumpa Lahiri’s fiction, the experience of arranged marriage entails female dissatisfaction, particularly when the union comes with a relocation to another country (Stoican, 2015: 23). Aparna is socially and emotionally misunderstood by her closest relatives, whose experience of acculturation is different from hers, as she is trapped inside the house. Thus, for Aparna, a change comes about when the family accidentally makes acquaintance with Pranab Chakraborty, a Bengali graduate student. Soon, the family gets very comfortable with Pranab, who is always there. The relationship between him and the mother (Aparna), whom he calls “Boudi”<sup>2</sup>, grows, and they share many things, primarily a taste for Bengali culture, as can be observed in the following quote narrated by the daughter:

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<sup>2</sup> Pranab calls Aparna “boudi” because in Bengali culture, the term is used to “call their friends’ or neighbours’ wife ‘boudi’ as a sign of affection and respect for the couple” (Chatterjee, 2022: 125).

They had in common all the things she and my father did not: a love of music, film, leftist politics, poetry. They were from the same neighborhood in Calcutta, their family homes within walking distance, the facades familiar to them once the exact locations were described. They knew the same shops, the same bus and tram routes, the same holes-in-the-wall for best jelahis and moghlai parathas (Lahiri, 2008: 64).

That relationship reasserts Aparna's Indianness in the sense that she feels closer than ever to her homeland:

Before we met him, I would return from school and find my mother with her purse in her lap and her trench coat on, desperate to escape the apartment where she had spent the day alone. But now I would find her in the kitchen, rolling out dough for luchis, which she normally made only on Sundays for my father and me, or putting up new curtains she'd bought at Woolworth's (Lahiri, 2008: 63).

Therefore, it seems clear by reading the latter passage that the connection with a Bengali man who embodies Bengali tradition but also praises her food puts her comfortably in the role she has been assigned as a *bhadramahila*, educated and also a good housekeeper and self-giving to the family. It might sound ironical that she tries to please a man who is not her husband, but actually, Pranab reminds her of her culture and her home, so the pleasing might be related to her feeling that she belongs, as Pranab and Aparna share more than the latter does with her husband. The domestic space becomes more welcoming for her, as the above quote confirms.

The house or the domestic space is vital in constructing the *bhadramahila* in the nineteenth century and, as Nilanjana Chatterjee vehemently acknowledges in her recent publication *Reading Jhumpa Lahiri: Women, Domesticity and the Indian American Diaspora* (2022), that Aparna: "fails to realize the amount of social, emotional, and sexual anxiety" she must endure as an Indian American woman in the host society. In Aparna's case, this means grappling with her anxieties in the household (Chatterjee, 2022: 120).

"Once in a Lifetime" revolves around two second-generation characters, Hema and Kaushik, from childhood to adulthood and their alternatal home<sup>3</sup> (Hai, 2012: 238-239). Moreover, there is a secondary female character, Shibani, Hema's mother. She is first mentioned by Hema, who narrates the story when Kaushik's family decides to return to India. Although little is known

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<sup>3</sup> The term "alternatal" in this case describes a family that has been formed through "newly constructed relationships" against the birth or natal family (Srikanth, 2012: 84).

about Shibani, the author offers the reader a glimpse into her upbringing in India: “My mother’s modest flat in Maniktala, above a grumpy Punjabi restaurant, where seven people existed in three small rooms. [...] My mother’s father was a clerk in the General Post Office, and she had neither eaten at a table nor sat on a commode before coming to America” (Lahiri, 2008: 225).

That description proves that Shibani, before coming to America, had little to no contact with Western modernity or bourgeois materialism embodied in the domestic spaces of Calcutta. That reasserts why we see her as a diasporic *bhadramahila* because her minimum contact with Western ways of life from her childhood until early adulthood is somehow preserved and then reenacted in America as part of a tight ethnic community. Indeed, as Claire Alexander posits in “Marriage, Migration, Multiculturalism: Gendering ‘The Bengal Diaspora’” (2013), when such minority women are inflicted through social markers such as ethnicity, race, or religion, they personify cultural differences, which are contained within the boundaries of community (Alexander, 2013: 337).

Hence, concerning domesticity, Shibani’s relationship with domestic appliances is most relevant, as Kaushik’s mother, Parul, decides to leave everything to her when she returns to India as a sign of goodwill but also as a means of transferring cultural citizenship and developing an alternative economy to the mainstream American society (Chatterjee, 2022: 99). The following quote shows how Kaushik and his family leave almost everything they own to Hema’s family, when they leave the USA to return to India..

In the days before you left, your parents came by again, to bring over pots and pans, small appliances, blankets and sheets, half-used bags of flour and sugar, bottles of shampoo. We continued to refer to these things as your mother’s. [...] Your mother also brought over shopping bags filled with clothes she thought I might be able to use, that once belonged to you (Lahiri, 2008: 225-226).

As mentioned at the end of the quote, some of the things left by Kaushik’s mother unequivocally pass on to Hema. Shibani’s willingness to pass this cultural heritage on to her daughter proves how strong ethnic communities are, reinforced by first-generation female immigrants. It causes some anxiety for Hema, the daughter, caught between the need to fit among her American peers and her mother’s need to “internalize the indigenous tradition and culture to fit in with the Bengali American community” (Chatterjee, 2022: 115). Shibani is effectively a diasporic *bhadramahila*, which can be proved by how much pleasure she takes in

her domestic space. She gets a subscription to *Good Housekeeping*, a magazine for women to learn domestic skills. It is relevant to remember that in nineteenth-century Bengal, the publication of conduct books regarding how to behave in the household space was a reality<sup>4</sup>. That is why some analogies between Shibani and the traditional figure of the reformed woman in Bengal, but also with American housewives can be drawn. In Shibani, we observe how the emptiness of not living in India is replaced by constant contact with the homeland via telephone or letters (Chatterjee, 2022: 99). Not only that, but she also feels alienated from her husband, whose job in America has enabled him to adapt much faster.

Besides, throughout the story, the mother clearly puts much effort into gaining some satisfaction from her role. For example, at the farewell party organised for Parul's family, Shibani takes precautions, so everything is spotless, "the furniture was polished, the paper plates and napkins set out on the table, the rooms filled with the smell of lamb curry and pulao and the L'Air du Temps my mother used for special occasions" (Lahiri, 2008: 223). Time passed, and on New Year's Day in 1981, Hema's family learned that Kaushik and his family were returning to America, where the father had a new job. It is this event that proves best how the diasporic *bhadramahila* works in the case of Shibani:

The house was prepared for your arrival. New throw pillows were purchased for the living-room sofa, bright orange against the brown tweed upholstery. The plants and the curios were rearranged, my school portrait framed and hung above the fireplace. [...] There were new towels in the bathroom for you and your parents, plusher than the ones we used and a prettier shade of blue (Lahiri, 2008: 229-230).

Hence, Parul and Shibani are part of the first-generation diaspora, and their identity is highly shaped by their experiences regarding their individual notion of dwelling. As part of the *bhadramahila* construct, they are bonded by a sense of cultural homesickness but also by the ideal vision of the Indian (read Hindu) nationalist family, where their domestic existence is curtailed by a sense of loneliness and exclusion in a transnational space that threatens their everyday life.

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<sup>4</sup> The *Good Housekeeping* magazine is still a popular magazine in 20<sup>th</sup> century America.

#### 4.- Negotiating the diasporic *bhadramahila* in *Desirable Daughters*

The novel *Desirable Daughters* (2002) puts forward a more nuanced interpretation of the female immigrant experience, celebrating the delights of the transnational passage but also giving attention to the difficulties that it entails (Lahiri, 2010: 121). The main character, Tara<sup>5</sup>, is well aware of her origins in India. At the beginning of the novel, she narrates how her father was a *bhadralok*:

To be Calcutta bhadra lok, as we Bhattacharjees were, was to share a tradition of leadership, of sensitivity, of achievement, refinement, and beauty that was the envy of the world. That is the legacy of the last generation of Calcutta high society, a world into which we three sisters were born, and from which we have made our separate exits (Mukherjee, 2002: 35-26).

The novel intertwines the impact of religion, history and community in a woman's identity, but also the association between home and gendered identities (Miller, 2004: 65). As Marty and Mohanty assert, *Desirable Daughters* explores "a complicated working out of the relationship between home, identity, and community that calls into question the notion of a coherent, historically continuous stable identity and works to expose the political stakes conceded in such equations" (Martin & Mohanty, 1986: 195).

At the beginning of the novel, Tara seems to cling to the expectations of transnational brides, utterly reliant on her husband. But, as time passes, Tara's desire for the unknown, the freedom that America supposedly grants her, grows more substantial, as in Bharati Mukherjee's personal life. That progressive transformation ends with her leaving her husband Bish because, as she asserts:

When I left Bish (let us be clear on this) after a decade of marriage, it was because the promise of life as an American wife was not being fulfilled. I wanted to drive, but where would I go? I wanted to work, but would people think that Bish Chatterjee couldn't support his wife? In his Atherton years, as he became better known on the American scene – a player, an adviser, a pundit – he also became, at home, more of a traditional Indian. [...] In India, he was even more the Indian husband, showing off for his mother, perhaps, how well-trained this upper-class Ballygunge girl had become, what a good cook, what an attentive wife and daughter-in-law (Mukherjee, 2002: 115).

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<sup>5</sup> Tara becomes an alter-ego of Bharati Mukherjee's life. First, she has three sisters with a Bengali Brahmin background; then, Tara and her sister go to Loreto school, the same one Bharati Mukherjee attended and finally, a return to the ancestral lieu "in recursive fashion, repeatedly emphasizing her family's intelligence, beauty, and breeding" (Maxey, 2019: 99).

This conflict is especially relevant in Mukherjee's female characters, who undergo a transformative process of adaptation, whilst the males tend to remain more attached to the birth culture and expect women to reproduce it at home. A consequence is that Tara is denied individualism, so her life remains a series of needs to be fulfilled (especially wifehood and motherhood), her own needs remaining oblivious. The protagonist of *Desirable Daughters* needs to start a process of Americanization, a kind of forced rebirth for those women who want to nuance their Indian 'feminine' identity, a process consisting of creating new narratives of the self by discarding the identity elements she had known thus far (caste, class, community, place of birth, mother tongue or region).

Mukherjee's protagonists reassert this newly found freedom by discovering their sexuality. As Sharmita Lahiri asserts in reference to Tara, "Her post-marital liaison with several men and her live-in romantic relationship with Andy define her as a woman who has overcome the conditioning of Indian sexual mores", apart from her accepting her son's homosexuality (2010: 124). Although everything in the text points to her assimilating in the United States, the subtext indicates otherwise. She is constantly made aware by her skin colour that she is an alien in American society, defying her assimilation in America. An unexpected event jeopardises her assimilation: the visit of her supposed nephew, the illegitimate son of her sister Padma and a Catholic man when Padma was in her teenage years. That makes her reflect on her past and the culture she was raised in, the premarital rules and what makes a good Indian wife; hence, "she is shown as not being able to completely dissociate herself from her Indian roots" (Lahiri, 2010: 119).

This dissociation between her American life and her Bengali identity roots becomes more present, the text and the subtext coming together when it is discovered that "her family secret is delved into by the underworld not to vindicate Padma, her past lover or her illegitimate son, but to target Bish through Tara's family connections, despite their divorce" (Lahiri, 2010: 126-127). When she goes to the police in her quest to find the truth about this unexpected visitor after so many years, she is told by an Indian-origin clerk that she cannot disregard her connections to one of the most prominent Indians in the community. This makes her more aware of her connections to Bengal, and she cannot find solace in the fact that it is someone from the past who attacked her home. A Bangladeshi impostor, who claims to be Padma's son,

triggers an adverse event when he bombs Tara's house, and Bish ends up disabled from the assault. Tara then decides to visit India and embrace Indian spirituality to cope with the distressing circumstances. She asserts: "Some force, whether biological or cosmic, more powerful than individual [...] incarnates us in the physical form it deems desirable" (Mukherjee, 2002: 382).

During her visit to India, Tara comes to recognise the conservative values of her husband, Bish, which have enabled him to maintain ties with her parents despite their divorce, more so when her mother tells her, "You've moved from us in your heart. But your husband has not" (Mukherjee, 2002: 127). The reader can infer that her identity as a female immigrant is indeed shaped by the coming together of America and India. That is exemplified by her visit to her ancestral village, Misthigunj, where she reconstructs the life and destiny of her ancestor and namesake, Tara Lata (the Tree Bride), to find meaning in her own life. The last scene follows: "Their voices drift through time, they penetrate the thickest stone fortress. I open myself to them" (Mukherjee, 2002: 424). The author tries to convey that the basis for constructing the identity of the female immigrant is rooted in her past. The ancient *bhadramahilas*, once they acquire that double-edged identity in a transnational context, still struggle to adhere to the American self completely.

Hence, Tara is the prime example of a post-colonial individual whose identity is in the process of becoming. All of those results in a hybrid subjectivity impacted not only by the present and the past but also by experience and history. As posited in *Home, Identity, and Mobility in Contemporary Diasporic Fiction* (2009), the hybrid condition "is not one that follows the values of any particular tradition. Rather, it is a more fluid one, able to accommodate different aspects" (Nyman, 2009: 212).

## 5. Conclusions

Contrary to the accepted notions of female immigration, both in *Unaccustomed Earth* and *Desirable Daughters*, Jhumpa Lahiri and Bharati Mukherjee suggest that the transnational and cross-cultural female experience entails the creation of new narratives combining elements from the past and recent experiences of immigration. Both works seem to adhere to the two authors' opinions on immigration, which revolve around assimilation and rebirth in the adopted

country; otherwise, the characters go through a process of Americanisation. In *Desirable Daughters*, Tara intends to assimilate into the United States despite her husband's insistence on keeping a conservative approach to wifhood and motherhood, which eventually result in her asking for a divorce. In sharp contrast, in "Hell-Heaven", it is Aparna who embodies a stereotypical model of Indian wifhood and desperately looks for someone who reminds her of what she has lost. Shibani in "Once in a Lifetime" also yearns to find meaning in aspects of domestic life.

It seems evident that the diasporic feminine experience in the United States is much more nuanced than was commonly thought, and the process of complete annihilation of the previous self is rarely accomplished. On the other hand, India and what it represents is prevalent in the construction of female selves. Hence, it is believed that both texts centre on the complex process of fusing the Indian and the American in a new concept, the Indian-American or Bengali-American *bhadramahila*. The hyphen means "and", which is the coming together of two dissimilar cultures. More than that, it is unmistakably clear that history plays a vital role in understanding those women undertaking the immigration process along with their husbands from 1965 after the Immigration and Nationality Act<sup>6</sup>, thus carrying a social and historical burden that accompanied them in their imposed location. Eventually, rather than an assimilating process, their lives become an unsuccessful attempt to find themselves, which in both texts ends up with these women desperately yearning to find their roots.

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<sup>6</sup> With the passage of the Immigration and Nationality Act in 1965, Indians and Pakistanis were allowed to apply for admission into the United States if their skills were exceptional and in short supply in the USA (Quraishi, 2020: 21).



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