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**The Notion of Indianness in Contemporary American Literature
with a Focus on Female Authors**

DIPLOMOVÁ PRÁCE

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Prohlašuji, že jsem tuto diplomovou práci vypracovala samostatně a pouze na základě uvedených pramenů a literatury.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

1	<u>INTRODUCTION</u>	5
2	<u>SELECTED NOVELS</u>	8
2.1	JHUMPA LAHIRI: <i>THE NAMESAKE</i>	8
2.2	CHITRA DIVAKARUNI: <i>QUEEN OF DREAMS</i>	9
2.3	THRITY UMRIGAR: <i>IF TODAY BE SWEET</i>	10
3	<u>THE WEST AND THE EAST</u>	11
3.1	STEREOTYPES AND REALITY	11
3.2	APPROACHES TOWARDS INDIA	14
3.2.1	CURATORIAL APPROACHES	15
3.2.2	EXOTICIST APPROACHES	16
3.2.3	MAGISTERIAL APPROACHES	20
4	<u>THE NOTION OF INDIANNESS</u>	22
4.1	NEW IDENTITY IN A NEW COUNTRY	22
4.2	THE GENERATION GAP	25
5	<u>EXPECTATIONS OF THE INDIAN-AMERICANS</u>	30
6	<u>EXPECTATIONS OF THE AMERICANS</u>	40
6.1	POVERTY	43
6.2	CUISINE	46
6.3	UNFAMILIARITY	50
6.4	RACISM	54
7	<u>CONCLUSION</u>	60
	<u>ČESKÉ SHRNUŤÍ</u>	62

BIBLIOGRAPHY 70

APPENDIX 72

1 Introduction

In the US 2000 Census, the number of Indian-Americans reached 1,678,765 people. It is the second largest Indian diaspora in the world preceded only by that in Myanmar, which comes near to three million.¹ In January 2008, the Indian-American community gained a very important victory in politics through the appointment of Bobby Jindal as the Governor of Louisiana.² Although his political views and decisions have been a source of disappointment and have provoked serious criticism, he is nonetheless the first Indian-American to reach higher echelons of power.

The American cultural sphere has also felt 'the Indian touch'. In 2000 Jhumpa Lahiri, a young Indian female writer, was awarded the Pulitzer Prize for her collection of short stories. Aishwarya Rai has successfully avoided being remembered only as the 1994 Miss World and has appeared in numerous Bollywood and Hollywood productions. In 2003 she was the first Indian actress to be a member of the Cannes Film Festival jury. Her male colleagues have yet to wait to be thus honoured.

The Indian community in the US obviously does not exist in a vacuum. With no physical borders limiting the interaction with the American majority, the two cultures mix and influence each other. The Indian community is neither isolated nor homogeneous. It reacts outwards to the American environment, and simultaneously it evolves within itself. The constant struggle to remain Indian enough is combined with the attempts to settle down peacefully in a country which may judge one as being Indian too much. The reality of everyday life includes prejudice, stereotyped attitudes, and often mistrust—on both sides. The exploitation of clichés by various religious doctrines and political factions leads to misinformation and misunderstanding of the two cultures. Also, the standpoint of the American political representation towards minorities (especially after 9/11) has become of crucial importance to the diaspora. The American society still seems to be struggling with the fact that their homeland is

¹ India, Ministry of External Affairs, Report of the High Level Committee on the Indian Diaspora, 15, Mar. 2008 <<http://indiandiaspora.nic.in/pressrelease.htm>>.

² "Bobby Jindal: The first Indian American governor," 15, Mar. 2008 <<http://overseasindian.in/2007/nov/news/20070611-100147.shtml>>.

now other people's homeland, too, and that these new settlers demand to be treated as fairly as any other Americans.

However, the term 'American society' presents a complex issue. In the novels selected in the thesis, the majority society is perceived rather schematically. The selection of American characters is mostly limited to white Anglo-Saxon members of the middle class. In Umrigar's novel, the character of Tara is an exception; however, she is stereotyped as a single mother from white trash background. Also, the Indian-American characters are often constructed as immigrants, and they are contrasted with a solid and settled majority. The aspect of the United States as a country based on immigration and internal migration is not pronounced in the novels. Several issues connected to the perception of the US, India and stereotypes associated with both countries are discussed further in the thesis.

The Indian-American population ranks third in the Asian American group in the US with the largest concentration in California (Report, 169). The immigrants bring with them their languages, social backgrounds, beliefs and customs. With such high numbers of persons of Indian origin (PIOs) in the US, the amount of imported cultural material can hardly disappear without a trace. Inevitably, the Indian diaspora finds its own distinctive voice to describe its American experience and to address troubling issues. These can be as numerous as the members of the community, but there seems to be a crystallized set of problems common to all the Indian-Americans. The notorious number one on the list is racism followed by various problems connected to assimilation, preservation of the Indian heritage, and the rights and obligations of the minority.³

The novels discussed in the thesis have been selected because they reflect the above mentioned problematic issues from various perspectives: they include the experience of immigrant parents, second generation Indian-Americans, American members of Indian-American families, and in the process they cover various age groups, genders, and social classes. The unifying theme is not only the set of problems but also the fact that all three novels are written by contemporary Indian-American female authors, whose firsthand insight is deep and precise.

The crucial point which the novels share is the concept of Indian identity, its construction and preservation. In each case, the identity of the main character

³ For a full list of demands and expectations of the diaspora, see the Report of the High Level Committee on the Indian Diaspora, chapter 14, 188-190.

presents a complicated issue. The Indian-American characters construct their identity under the influence of their families, friends, and society. They are often challenged by the expectations of two different cultures which are both part of their lives. The process of the formation of identity depends on numerous issues, and the results differ and evolve according to the experience and development of the individual characters. Nevertheless, there are several broad areas which are prominent in the novels and will be discussed subsequently: the question of roots and origin, the role of Indian culture and heritage, and the preservation of Indian customs and traditions.

The purpose of the thesis is to offer an introduction into the contemporary Indian-American female fiction, specifically into the issues it presents in relation to the construction of the individual identity. Conflicting attitudes towards the notion of the Indian identity within and outside the Indian community will be discussed. It is essential to mention various points of view of the American society and the approach of the Western world in general. The discussion will also address the persistent stereotypes and clichés attributed to the Indian-American community.

In order to produce a transparent picture and to enable a smooth access into the discussed field, the plots of the three novels follow in brief summaries.

2 Selected novels

2.1 Jhumpa Lahiri: *The Namesake*

The novel spans the years 1968 to 2000. It focuses on the family of the Gangulis, who live in Massachusetts in the US. Ashoke Ganguli married his wife Ashima in an arranged wedding in Calcutta and later took her to America, where he finished his university studies and got a job as a lecturer. Their son, Gogol, and daughter, Sonali, (she is nicknamed Sonia) were born in the US.

Both parents have never felt that America is their new home. Ashoke can at least pursue his academic career and satisfy his ambitions, but Ashima spends her life as a housewife. They both miss India profoundly, and at the end of the novel—after the death of her husband—Ashima decides to move back to India.

The children, on the contrary, feel at home in the US. For them India is a strange country where people have peculiar habits and speak odd languages. Despite their parents' attempts to mediate the Indian cultural heritage, family roots, and religious rites, Gogol and Sonia grow up to be Americans. The unwillingness to conform to the expectations of his family and Bengali community is the key feature of Gogol. Through him other important characters are introduced to the plot as the story evolves. His American girlfriend, Maxine, and her family accept him warmly, but they cannot help him in his quest for self-recognition and self-respect.

After the death of his father, Gogol assumes the role of the head of the family. He realises the importance of traditions and rituals, which have kept the family intact and alive in a foreign country. Now he also sees their special importance to his mother as a link to India, to a country where she truly belongs. His attempts to separate himself from his origins by protest or rejection now seem shallow. He comes to understand that his identity is not determined by place of birth or by place of residence but by events in his life and choices that he makes. He does not have to ignore his Indian background in order to fit in American society. He already is a part of the society.

The construction of Gogol's identity is a lengthy process accompanied by stories and recollections of other vivid characters. Lahiri skilfully exploits existing clichés and generalizations to subvert the traditional picture of the Indian community in the United States.

2.2 Chitra Divakaruni: *Queen of Dreams*

Rakhi is a divorced mother of a six-year-old daughter, Jona, and she lives in California. Her ex-husband, Sonny, also of Indian origin, is a famous DJ and maintains a good relationship with his daughter and former mother-in-law. Rakhi's mother is a dream-teller, raised and trained in India. She left the country when she met her future husband, and together they moved to the United States, where Rakhi was born. Rakhi and her best friend, Belle, run a coffee shop with faltering success, and Rakhi also pursues a career as an artist.

The situation changes dramatically with the death of Rakhi's mother in a strange car accident and with the opening of a competitive coffee house in the neighbourhood. Rakhi suddenly faces both personal and business problems, and she seems rather helpless. Her life is further complicated by the virtual vacuum that appears between her and her father. He was never really involved in her life and she has to learn slowly about his importance for the future.

A crucial part of the novel is formed by intimate diary entries of Rakhi's mother. The existence of the diaries was unknown to everybody until after her death. Now Rakhi gets the chance to explore her own family history, find her roots and fully establish her place with the help of a newly reconstructed identity. She has a choice of living in America as a stranger or as a citizen, and she chooses the latter. For Rakhi, citizenship means connection, participation and involvement. At the same time, she realises the importance of her connection and involvement in the lives of other people around her, and she is able to accept her father and Sonny as essential parts of her life.

The terrorist attacks of 9/11 change her position in the society with shocking speed and effect. Suddenly, Rakhi and all her friends are regarded with suspicion as a dangerous element. They experience violent racism and fear. Rakhi shares the exact same feelings about the attacks as her American counterparts, but her otherness sets her apart. After coming to terms with her background and family, the most difficult task is now before her: she must come to terms with a whole country, which has absurdly rejected her.

2.3 Thrity Umrigar: *If Today Be Sweet*

The main character of the novel is Tehmina Sethna: a wife, mother, and grandmother. Recently widowed, she comes to Cleveland, Ohio, to stay with her son, Sorab, his wife, Susan, and their young son, Cavas, nicknamed Cookie. Tehmina is devastated by the loss of her much-beloved husband, Rustom, and it is not very easy for her to get accustomed to the American lifestyle. Her mutual relationship with Susan is also rather ailing.

The central issue is Tehmina's decision about her future life. Sorab would like to keep her in the US, but she is not prepared to leave India completely and does not feel comfortable with her new life perspective. She is not a complete stranger to America because she visited the country many times before with her husband, yet the situation is now painful for her. She wants to avoid disappointing her son but, on the other hand, she does not want to give up her life in Bombay.

Although Tehmina has a very close friend, a Jewish woman Eva Metzenbaum, otherwise she does not feel really welcome in the society. Her problems with Susan escalate, which leads to discord within the whole family. For Sorab, the situation becomes unbearable because he will always side with one woman he loves against the other he loves, too.

The turn of events which helps to solve Tehmina's problem arrives with the neighbouring family of Tara Jones, a single mother with two sons, Jerome and Joshua. Tara is a difficult and irresponsible person, and Tehmina is appalled by her behaviour towards the boys. Contrary to Susan's wishes, Tehmina becomes involved with the boys and becomes a local hero for easing their dire situation. Suddenly, she feels alive again, and she realises that she must take her life in her own hands.

Her constant scruples and indecision are forgotten. She is willing to start a new life in America but only under her own conditions. She will not give up her opinions and her own previous life experience only to fit in more easily. Her quest is not to find or re-invent herself but to reassess her own value under new circumstances. The clash of the two cultures does not have to be destructive; it can lead to understanding and acceptance.

3 The West and the East

3.1 Stereotypes and reality

In many discussions about India, its history, religions, and culture, there occurs an inevitable moment of labelling. In order to define the perspective of the point of view, the speaker often chooses to use the traditional dichotomy of the West versus the East. India is regarded as a representative of the latter because it seems to encompass the sum of all attributes that the West usually associates with the East. Said explains: “The Orient is an idea that has a history and a tradition of thought, imagery, and vocabulary that have given it reality and presence in and for the West.”⁴ Thus the label ‘the Orient’ is fixed upon the country out of habit and with certain complacency disregarding the fact that modern India is almost as far from the lush and enchanting imagery of Orient as modern Europe. However, historical clichés and stereotypes die hard.

Said’s *Orientalism* is concerned primarily with a different geographic area than the Indian subcontinent; however, the implications apply to India as well. Generally, Oriental countries are associated with backwardness, inferiority, laziness, disorganization and uncivilized conditions. A fitting comment by a British historian observes: “Indeed, the impression has been created that everything ‘Western’ is civilized, and that everything civilized is Western. By extension, or simply by default, anything vaguely Eastern or ‘Oriental’ [is] worthy of neglect.”⁵ The concept of the Orient is constructed artificially by the West and is indiscriminate in essence. The Western attitude permits only the distinction between the East and the West without questioning its own validity. The concept of the dominating West is not challenged. It is understood as a fixed and stable point around which the non-Western world is moved and reshuffled primarily with the Western world’s benefit in mind. However, there is nothing constant in the West and it escapes definition just like the schematised Orient. The idea of ‘the West’ is subverted by Davies:

[It] is as old as the Greeks, who saw Free Hellas as the antithesis of the Persian-ruled despotisms to the East. In modern times, it has been adopted by a long succession of political interests who wished to

⁴ Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage Books, 1979) 5.

⁵ Norman Davies, *Europe: A History* (London: Pimlico, 1997) 19.

reinforce their identity and to dissociate themselves from their neighbours. As a result, 'Western civilization' has been given layer upon layer of meanings and connotations. (Davies, 22)

In the novels, a certain level of schematisation is partially present in the attitudes of both the American majority and the Indian-American minority. India and its inhabitants are perceived as homogeneous entities, and the same applies to the US and Americans. The authors sometimes tend to create simplified situations in order to be able to compare with greater effect the differences between Indians and Americans. In Umrigar's novel, the sharp division between the West and the East is markedly pronounced. Umrigar uses a somewhat artificial contrast of America's exaggerated cleanness and India's colourful untidiness to convey the feeling of sterility (both physical and emotional) of the American way of life. Occasionally, stereotypes are perpetuated and exploited – such as the notion of India as a mystic and spiritual country – in order to produce a desired plot. Rakhi is a character most influenced by India's alleged mysterious traditions. She starts to question the exoticist stereotypes only after she gains undistorted knowledge of India. Also, the existence and subversion of stereotypes play a crucial role in the process of the construction and reconstruction of identity of the Indian-American characters. Generally accepted assumptions and their later rejection accompany the quest of the main characters.

The stereotype-breaking process occurs also in the real world. Recently, India has been recognised as a country with great potential for future development. When Sorab calls himself a "third-world bumpkin,"⁶ he refers to the stereotyped perception of India as a poor developing country with a high level of illiteracy. In economic terms, India has long ceased to be the land inhabited by uneducated peasants who keep herds of goats, worship cows, and dress in simple strips of homespun cloth. The misconception might well have something to do with the influential persona of Mahatma Gandhi, who did indeed stress the peace and simplicity of the village life as the foundations of the Indian civilization. At this moment it is very important to remember that his opinions were formed in reaction to the British colonial rule, and should, therefore, be considered in a proper historical context. Also, there were other prominent political figures such as India's first Prime Minister Nehru, who opposed Gandhi's contempt for modernism.

⁶ Thrity Umrigar, *If Today Be Sweet* (New York: William Morrow, 2007) 63.

Nowadays, India is the second fastest expanding country in the world, its economic rise surpassed only by that of China. India's position in south-east Asia has been recognized in military terms as well. It is likely to be the decisive power either to balance or to tip the nuclear scales in the region. India has gained open support from the United States in 2005: "[America wants] to help India become a major world power in the twenty-first century."⁷ The CIA also predicted that India would become the world's fourth most powerful country by 2012, as measured by a combination of economic, military and technological strength (Luce, 282). The friendly approach of the US administration is motivated by almost two million people of Indian origin living in the USA. "Indian-Americans are the richest ethnic group [...], with an average annual income of more than fifty thousand dollars" (Luce, 282). According to the Report of the High Level Committee on the Indian Diaspora, the per capita income is currently estimated at US \$60, 093 compared to the average per capita income of US \$38, 885 (Report, 169). Now a new kind of Indians emerges: educated, wealthy, confident, and increasingly Americanised.

The rapid ascent of the generation of these 'new Indians' causes dramatic changes in India, too. Luce explains:

The employment of hundreds of thousands of young engineers, scientists, economics and English graduates on pay scales that often exceeded those of their parents nearing retirement age created a new generation of consumers with little time for India's traditional pace of life. (Luce, 36)

With higher and better education there is also the chance of employment with a company abroad, mostly in the United States.⁸ This is a typical situation which has occurred in the IT and technology sectors. It is estimated that 35% of Boeing's technical work force is Indian (Report, 170). Nowadays, employees of Indian origin form the bulk of IT specialists, and companies based in India compete successfully on the market. India's best-known software company, Infosys, has expanded more than tenfold since 1998. The majority of the early employees have already become dollar-millionaires (Luce, 300-301).

⁷ Edward Luce, *In Spite of the Gods: The Strange Rise of Modern India* (London: Abacus, 2007) 281.

⁸ More than 87% of Indo-Americans have completed high school while 62% have some college education compared to just over 20% for the US population. (Report, 169)

In the novels, Lahiri and Umrigar include the economically successful characters (male and female), and contrast their affluent lifestyle with the more humble one of their parents. In all cases the relative poverty of people in India is compensated by a far deeper relationship with others and by the colourfulness and activity of everyday life. The American lifestyle is often described as sterile and empty despite the comfort and abundance it offers. Obviously, the comparison is based on the perception of the US as a consumer society, and on the assumption that poor people are happier because they do not have to deal with problems stemming from economic wealth. It is clearly a stereotypical perspective, and the authors adopt it because it offers an easy way to compare India and the US with the desired result. Further stereotypes and their treatment are discussed in chapter five.

3.2 Approaches towards India

The construction of India in Western imagination can be divided into three major categories. They have produced distinct views of Indian culture, history and traditions, and they have also influenced the Indian self-image that emerged in the colonial period and survives today. Inevitably, they have led to the creation of stereotypes, which in the novels influence the (self-) perception of the Indian-Americans. According to Sen, they are the exoticist, the magisterial and the curatorial categories.

The exoticist category concentrates on the wondrous aspects of India, mainly emphasizing the spirituality and mysticism. The magisterial approach addresses the white man's burden in depraved and corrupt India. The curatorial approach relates to systematic curiosity and includes investigations of Indian culture, religions, languages and customs.⁹ Obviously, these approaches have had considerable influence on Western perceptions of India, and their traces can be found in the novels.

⁹ Amartya Sen, The Argumentative Indian: Writings on Indian Culture, History and Identity (London: Penguin Books, 2006) 140-153.

3.2.1 Curatorial approaches

Historically, the curatorial approaches have played a major role in recognizing and acknowledging the potential of India. Many of the British colonial governors and officers saw the uniqueness and antiquity of the Indian civilization. Comparative language studies were conducted to prove the immense influence of Sanskrit in the Indo-European language family, and the level of scientific knowledge was highly appreciated. Unlike the exoticist approaches, the curatorial approach does involve proper systematisation and characterisation. However, it is often connected to the magisterial approach when the scholars, officers or authors are also members of the ruling imperial elite. Nevertheless, the curatorial category is generally the most objective in its approach to India, although Sen concludes:

There can be little doubt that the Western perceptions of India were profoundly influenced by these investigations. [...] On the other hand, the curatorial approaches have inclinations of their own, with a general interest in seeing the object – in this case, India – as very special and extraordinarily interesting. [...] As a result, they could not escape being somewhat slanted in their focus. (Sen, 142, 146)

What Sen has in mind is the fact that the curatorial approach often focuses on those things that are distinctive in India. Dedicated— but in its scope limited— research can sometimes ignore important and relevant facts because they do not strike the scholars as different enough. The common aspects of Indian culture and traditions fail to be noticed properly.

A curatorial approach of a special kind can be found in Divakaruni's novel.¹⁰ In this case, the Indian tradition is not approached from the outside and from a completely different cultural background. It is Rakhi's mother herself who selects, categorises, and classifies a specific part of the Indian environment: the tradition of dream telling. She is one of the dream tellers; therefore her investigation of the art of dream telling is a first-hand experience undisturbed by a transfer of undesired elements from the West. Also, she studied the art of dream telling with great attention before her initiation, and she is aware of the importance of even the smallest details. Therefore, her collection of dreams is accurate. However, her ability to dream the

¹⁰ Chitra Divakaruni, *Queen of Dreams* (London: Abacus, 2005).

dreams of others and explain their meanings is known only to a limited number of people.

While the scholars and British colonial officers approached India with the aim to investigate and then publish their extraordinary findings, Rakhi's mother keeps her collection of dreams secret. She is aware of Rakhi's incessant curiosity, but she is also extremely aware of the immense responsibility that her gift of dream telling requires, and she is unwilling to compromise her authenticity for mere thrill. Even though Rakhi tries to enter her mother's world of dreams, she is unable to do so directly in person because she lacks the skills necessary to tell dreams. Rakhi later finds the accounts of the dreams in her mother's diaries and realises the complexity of her mother's life. She also understands that the dream world is not a place for her to live; it was only her mother's. The dream world and its perfect curatorial recollection in the diaries also serves as a metaphor of India which Rakhi's mother left physically but to which has always maintained a mental connection. Rakhi, on the other hand, constructs her identity differently because she is rooted only in one world—the US. The development of Rakhi's identity will be discussed in the following chapter.

3.2.2 Exoticist approaches

The exoticist category exaggerates the wondrous and arcane aspects of Indian traditions, mainly the spiritual elements. Western rationality is challenged by the observation of exotic ideas and views. As a result, Indian traditions are reduced in the process. India's rich intellectual (and rational) heritage is deliberately overlooked in order to highlight the mysterious, mystical, and—for the Western observer—highly attractive aspects. As Sen observes:

Exoticist admirations tend to build up the mystical and extra-rational aspects with particular care. [...] Indian traditions in mathematics, logic, science, medicine, linguistics or epistemology may be well known to the Western specialist, but they play little part in the general Western understanding of India. (Sen, 154-155)

The search for the extraordinary objects and achievements has a profound effect on the perception of India. The arbitrary research of Indian traditions and the

absence of verified facts lead to misinformation and false assumptions about the nature of the Indian civilisation, culture, religions, science, etc. Western imagination is propelled by descriptions and accounts of fantastic (and often fabricated) Indian achievements. The exoticist authors often design a special version of India which is customized to satisfy Western imagination and the hunger for the extraordinary. What may have started as an attempt to disrupt the prevalent rationalism ascribed to the West has ended as a disruption of the rational aspect of India.

There are two negative outcomes of the exoticist approach towards India. Both deeply influence the perception of India in the West and also the self-perception of Indians. First, a bitter disillusion arises every time when the invented version of India fails to fulfil the expectations of the Western imagination. Sen presents an episode which occurred early in the 20th century, when Ezra Pound (and others) led “a chorus of adoration at the lyrical spirituality of Rabindranath Tagore’s poetry” (Sen, 153). Tagore was a Bengali poet of tremendous creativity and range, but he failed to fit the image of “sermonizing spiritual guru put together in London” (ibid). Ezra Pound and the group of his associates did not blame themselves for their exoticist approach, of course. Instead, Bernard Shaw created a caricature of ‘Stupendranath Begorr’ in one of his plays.¹¹ When the exoticist approaches are found to be false and insufficient, the aspects in question—which obviously cannot meet the expectations—are rejected and made responsible. The sheer absurdity of many of the exoticist inventions is ignored.

Second, it is not surprising that the Indian society has learned to find at least some advantage in the process of Western exoticist ‘creativity’. India’s glorification and idolisation is reinforced to serve two purposes: to satisfy the Western imagination by perpetuating the exoticist fabrications, and to strengthen a sense of purpose among Indians themselves. Indian self-perception and identity are inevitably influenced by the portrayal of India (and Indians) imposed on the country by the exoticist West. Both Luce and Sen agree that:

Colonial undermining of self-confidence had the effect of driving many Indians to look for sources of dignity and pride in some special achievements in which there was less powerful opposition – and also

¹¹ Bernard Shaw’s *A Glimpse of the Domesticity of Franklyn Barnabas* was written in 1920, published in 1932.

less competition – from the imperial West, including India’s alleged excellence in spirituality. (Sen, 79-80)

Particularly during the era of British colonial rule and its aftermath, many Indians endorsed in one form or another the view that India was a uniquely metaphysical civilization. To most Indians this was certainly preferable as a self-image to the belittlement that was doled out by many [...] of India’s colonial rulers. (Luce, 4)

It is hardly a surprise to find ‘the spiritual India’ as one of the most persistent stereotypical versions of India. Nowadays, the image is still preserved by the Western demand for mystical experience. The exoticist stereotype has become an important source of economic profit as well. India is often the destination of Western spiritual seekers, who keep local ashrams, yoga centres, and meditation facilities thriving, and who then support local economies.¹² The popularity of various spiritual organisations, such as the Hare Krishna Society, contributes to the continuously popularised and perpetuated exoticist version of India. The real spiritual heritage of India is often reduced to the easily marketed aspects while the complexity and intricacies of Indian religious doctrines and philosophies are ignored.

In the novels, the exoticist approaches (and the stereotypes they produce) influence both the American society and the Indian-American characters. Examples of various stereotypes are included further in the thesis, but now it is useful to introduce in more detail the main character of Divakaruni’s novel: Rakhi. She is a second-generation Indian-American without any direct contact with India. Her knowledge of the traditions, culture and heritage of the country is unsatisfactory because she does not have a reliable source. Her parents do not observe most of the Indian traditions and rituals at home. The only exceptions are the clothes Rakhi’s mother wears and the food she cooks, as Rakhi recalls: “At home we rarely ate anything but Indian; that was the only way in which my mother kept her culture” (Divakaruni, 7). Rakhi has never visited India and never studied her native language. She has lived all her life in the US environment and has adopted the stance of the American majority—in her case it is an attitude to India tinged with exoticism.

¹² One of the most ambitious experiments is Auroville, a so-called universal city, which is also proudly described as the city the Earth needs. However, the exoticist limitations and virtually sectarian atmosphere are profoundly discouraging according to my personal experience. More information is available at www.auroville.org

In her uncritical idolisation of India, Rakhi constructs her own version of the country, which is a hybrid of the exoticist wonders and stereotyped perceptions. She believes that India is an extraordinary country where she can find answers to all her questions— if only she could gain access. Naturally, she tries to get the information which she desires from her parents because they have first-hand experience with India. However, her mother often avoids talking about India, and her father's accounts disappoint Rakhi because they clash with her expectations. The way she imagines India is already influenced by exoticist stereotypes: she expects to be thrilled by exciting stories:

To be an interpreter of the inner realm seemed so Indian. (In thinking this, of course, I deluded myself. Weren't the American papers filled with adverts about psychics?) I hungered for all things Indian because my mother never spoke of the country she'd grown up in. (Divakaruni, 35)

My father informed me, with gruesome glee that Calcutta flooded with every big rain and decades-old muck (and worse) came up out of the sewers, and people died of cholera. But I was not fooled. They were hiding things from me, beautiful, mysterious, important things.

(Divakaruni, 81)

Rakhi's mother has a reasonable explanation for her silence: she does not want to keep Rakhi tied to India, and she hopes that Rakhi's life in the new country will be less complicated. It is certainly true—Rakhi fits in the American society comfortably and feels at ease in an environment, where many Indian-Americans do not. But now her perception of India is complicated, and it also influences the construction of her identity. It is essential for Rakhi to abandon the exoticist imagery of India in order to successfully recreate her identity. Her quest is further discussed in the chapter focused on the gap between the first and second generations of Indian-Americans.

3.2.3 Magisterial approaches

This category is strongly related to the British colonial empire. India is seen as a subject territory where the superior power of British governors is essential for the proper development of the country and civilisation. The notion of the white man's burden justifies the dismissive attitude of the ruling colonial elite. Predominantly, the magisterial approaches present India as a hopelessly impoverished, degraded, depraved, and corrupt country. Indian culture and traditions are considered primitive and barbaric. India is not respected, and Indians are not equal to the British. The magisterial approaches often deliberately ignore the findings of scholars because "the respectful curatorial approaches painted a picture of Indian intellectual traditions that was much too favourable for the imperial culture of the nineteenth century" (Sen, 154).

In the dismissal of India as a degraded country and in the notion of superiority of the Western civilisation, the magisterial approaches are connected to racism. Their negative effects have also played an essential part in many decisions and influenced prominent historical and political figures. A notorious speech of Winston Churchill illuminates the atmosphere of the 1930s:

"It is alarming and also nauseating to see Mr. Gandhi, a seditious Middle Temple lawyer...this malignant subversive fanatic...striding half-naked up to the steps of the Viceregal palace, while he is still organising and conducting a defiant campaign of civil disobedience, to parley on equal terms with the representative of the King-Emperor...The truth is that Gandhism and all it stands for will, sooner or later, have to be grappled with and finally crushed. It is no use trying to satisfy a tiger by feeding him cats [sic] meat...it must be made plain that the British nation has no intention of relinquishing its mission in India...we have no intention of casting away the most truly bright and precious jewel in the Crown of the King, which more than all our other Dominions and Dependencies constitutes the glory and strength of the British Empire."¹³

¹³ Eric Williams, *British Historians and the West Indies*, 150-1, 9 Apr. 2008 <<http://histomatist.blogspot.com/2005/11/churchill-on-gandhi.html>>.

Churchill calls India “the most truly bright and precious jewel” but it does not mean that he values the country per se. India embodies the success of the British colonial empire and serves only as a passive stage on which the British imperialism displays its glorious results. The choice of adjectives describing Gandhi betrays Churchill’s personal disgust with the Indian and also conveys the widely accepted magisterial rhetoric.

Such extremely simplified and derogatory attitudes to India, as those mentioned above, are nowadays rare. The influence of magisterial approaches has been significantly weakened. Racial prejudice is not generally accepted in the society. However, the novels show that the world is not an ideal place, and some traces of racist behaviour are still present. Umrigar and Divakaruni introduce several characters whose attitudes to the Indian-Americans are influenced by the magisterial approaches. The theme of racism—due to the gravity of the problem—is developed in greater detail in a separate chapter further in the thesis.

The curatorial, exoticist and magisterial approaches are products of the Western understanding (or misunderstanding and misinterpretation) of the Orient, and India in particular. These approaches have shaped not only the image and perception of India in the West but also the self-perception of Indians. In recent years, the increasing number of Indian immigrants has brought the issue with them to the US.

4 The notion of Indianness

After arrival in the United States, new immigrants experience a profound culture shock. Their native traditions and values are challenged by the American majority culture. They face problems associated with the settlement and assimilation in a vastly different environment than that of their homeland. Their ability to succeed in the process is determined by their willingness to react flexibly to a large number of various influences. For the majority of the Indian-American characters in the novels, the US is their final destination, and they never return back to India. After their arrival in the new country, they are in a complex situation: on the one hand, they feel the satisfaction of having reached their goal; on the other hand, their real life in the new country has only just begun, and it will take a long time (for most of them) to find eventual satisfaction.

In the novels, the main issue connected to immigration, settlement and assimilation is the successful construction and reconstruction of the individual identity. This issue is accompanied by three important aspects: the influence of the new country, the gap between first and second immigrant generations, and the stereotypes maintained by and within the immigrant community. The discussion of the first two points follows; due to its importance, the last aspect is discussed in more detail in separate chapters.

4.1 New identity in a new country

The United States is a country with its own rich history of immigration. The emergence of the country and the birth of the American nation are based on immigration. Originally European, the immigrants later created a new common identity and perceived themselves as Americans, members of a new nation, independent from their former homelands. However, their new identity was selective and exclusive: 'American' equalled white, Anglo-Saxon, and Protestant. Native Indians and imported African slaves were left out of the account.

The process of the creation of such seemingly unified national identity is not only the hallmark of the US. The Indian identity (as perceived in India) is also a concept which was forged artificially to serve as a unifying cover. However, there is a

radical difference between the construction of the American and the Indian identity. The American identity existed as a compact notion almost from the beginnings of the new nation, whereas the common Indian identity was constructed much later in the history of India. Various kingdoms, empires, and tribal territories existed in India from ancient times, and the differences among geographical and political areas were immense. Nowadays, India includes speakers of eighteen languages as recognized by the Constitution, compared to the predominant position of English in the US. Also, the Indian subcontinent was inhabited simultaneously in various regions, the populations often existing independently of each other. The settlement of the US was planned and followed a clear direction from the East to the West. Therefore, the new American identity was spreading evenly as the frontier moved on.

Obviously, the American identity faced a serious challenge of subsequent waves of immigrants from diverse countries, cultures and backgrounds. In order to secure the survival of the national identity, each successive group of immigrations had to assimilate and become American. The process is described by the 'melting pot' analogy: the fusion of different elements removes the individual traits, which can harm the unity, and leaves a perfected homogeneous product. Immigrants leave behind their identities, which are historically, culturally, and traditionally coloured; they adopt a newly constructed identity and become American—their assimilation is complete.

Later, the idea of the melting pot was successfully challenged by the notion of 'mosaic' or 'symphony.' The American identity does not necessarily have to be constructed uniformly (and it is also virtually impossible). It is preferable to retain the individuality and integrity of the elements and construct the identity as a mix of various parts. At this moment, diversity becomes the important aspect.

The current situation in the American society does not require immigrants to lose their distinctive features and fade into the mainstream culture. However, the perceptions of immigrant minorities depend on more than just an ideal 'mosaic' interpretation. The Indian-American characters in the novels have to deal with a number of stereotypical attitudes towards their community including disrespect, suspicion, and racism. They also have to solve complex issues concerning their identity and self-perception because it is hardly possible for them to remain an unchanging part of the mosaic.

It is also important to focus on the reasons which lead the Indian characters to the decision to migrate to the US. One of the most prominent incentives in the process of making the decision to leave India is the economic gain and career prospect in the new country. It underlies the final 'yes' of all principal characters in the novels. Gogol's father Ashoke is offered a chance to join the American academic world; Sorab is able to start climbing on the career ladder to unprecedented heights, and Rakhi's parents simply think about America as a land of their destiny.

This trend has been well documented in recent economic overviews. There has been a growing influx of highly skilled work force in various occupational sectors. The boom has been particularly massive in the information technology sector, in biotechnology and in engineering. According to the Report of the High Committee on the Indian Diaspora, about 300,000 Indian-Americans work in technology firms in California's Silicon Valley, and there are about 700 Indian owned companies (Report, 170). New opportunities are available with the continuous research and development of technologies and manufacturing.

With an 'American job', the benefits and advantages of the American lifestyle become available, and for many Indians, it is definitely a change for the better. Compared to India, the American system is virtually corruption free, the level of bureaucracy is visibly lower, and the average standards are surpassing. The criticism of the negative aspects of the life conditions in India is present in the novels and most pronounced by Umrigar. Among the most disgraceful elements is poverty, hunger, filth, lack of safe water, and pollution. With better economic conditions—such as America offers—the Indians are able to escape the gloomy reality of India and support themselves, their families and even their Indian relatives.

On the other hand, many Indian-Americans admit to feelings of loss after they leave India and settle in the US. As the Report states:

While Indian Americans are generally far better off in the United States than they would have been in India, many suffer from homesickness. There is even a mixture of nostalgia and bitterness about having had to leave a land they secretly miss. The emotional insecurity and stresses caused by an alien environment play an important role in the psychological make-up of Indian Americans. (Report, 172-173)

In the novels, the Indian-American immigrants arrive in the US with an identity which was constructed in India under different conditions. The immigrants contribute

their foreign origin, mother tongues, personal names, customs and traditions to the mosaic of the American world. Now they find themselves in a new country which presents them with the opportunity to change their lifestyle, adopt new values, and lead a usually more comfortable life than in India. At the same time, they are often tempted to shed some aspects of the Indian culture and heritage because they perceive them as old-fashioned and useless under the new circumstances. Obviously, new choices and changes in the attitudes and lifestyle of the Indian-Americans create tension and stress. The fundamental questions are related to the construction and reconstruction of their identity: where is the border that divides the Indian and the American identity, and when is it no longer possible to separate them? In the discussion of these issues, it is necessary to distinguish between the first and second generation of Indian-Americans (see the following chapter).

4.2 The generation gap

The members of the first generation of Indian-Americans include immigrants from India who arrive in the US as adults. In all three novels, the characters of the first generation often cling to fond and idealized memories of their homeland (Rakhi's mother is the only exception), and it makes their settlement in the US even more difficult. On the other hand, thanks to such memories they maintain the awareness of who they are and of their origins.

They do not reconstruct their identity radically. In the new environment, certain adjustments are inevitable but these changes and modifications are often balanced by constant maintenance of the remaining Indian traditions, customs and values. For example, Ashima Ganguli and her husband Ashoke become bilingual by choice: they speak English in the American environment and Bengali in the Indian-American community. However, their attempts to teach their children the language are weak, and when Gogol starts to learn the language during weekend courses, they do not offer much incentive to him. To go to the weekend classes is an annoying obligation for him. Lahiri describes the Bengali lessons:

The children in the class study without interest, wishing they could be at ballet or softball practice instead. Gogol hates it because it keeps him from attending [his] drawing class. [...] In Bengali class they read from

hand-sewn primers brought back by their teacher from Calcutta, intended for five-year-olds, printed, Gogol can't help noticing, on paper that resembles the folded toilet paper he uses at school.¹⁴

The fact that the parents do not teach the children to speak their native language is quite remarkable. It would have been relatively easy to raise the child as naturally bilingual but none of the second generation Indian-Americans speak the Indian native language. In the case of Rakhi, the explanation is simple: she does not have parental support, and her mother does not want her to be immersed in the Indian heritage at all in order to avoid confusion and a clash with the mainstream culture. As for Gogol, his parents speak Bengali at home (in front of the children, of course) but he does not consider the language as his own. In contrast to Rakhi, Gogol can pursue the study of Bengali but his parents fail to encourage him enough, and he does not persevere. He lacks the motivation to study his native language because even his parents are able to communicate with him in English. Bengali is for him a residue of a different culture, and he lacks direct connection with it. His parents try to establish this connection for him, but their attempts fail because Gogol is already constructing his identity under different conditions.

The construction of the identity of the first generation also includes loyalty to the Indian cultural heritage and customs and the observance of rituals. The traditional member of the first generation eats Indian food, follows household rules, performs rituals as in India, and wears traditional clothing at least within the community. For immigrants of the first generation, these are the things which bind them together and connect all of them to India. Naturally, the characters born in India, such as Gogol's parents or Tehmina, do not question the necessity of these elements, and they are well aware of their importance. Also, the traditions and rules are a usual part of their lives, and they were accustomed to this lifestyle long before they came to the US.

Their children, on the contrary, lack a strong emotional link to India and their attitudes are not so reverent: ““And isn't it funny how everyone always misses Bombay as long as they're not living there?’ ” (Umrigar, 55). The second generation of Indian-Americans is already born in the US. The children are raised by Indian parents according to Indian traditions, but they also enter the American world at an early stage, and they interact with the mainstream environment on multiple levels: at

¹⁴ Jhumpa Lahiri, *The Namesake* (London: Harper Perrenial, 2004) 66.

nurseries and schools, among American friends, in their free time in American cities, parks, and playgrounds. They tend to adopt the American way of life very easily because for them it is the mainstream way. The children often reject the world of their parents because it seems strange, does not fit in their perception of their lives, and has no real meaning for them:

For the sake of Gogol and Sonia they celebrate, with progressive fanfare, the birth of Christ, an event the children look forward to far more than the worship of Durga and Saraswati. [...] It can't compare to Christmas, when they hang stockings on the fireplace mantel, and set out cookies and milk for Santa Claus, and receive heaps of presents, and stay home from school. (Lahiri, 64-65)

Another great drawback which makes it difficult for the children to accept the Indian way of life—and come to terms with an integral part of their identity—is the lack of first-hand experience. The children have never been in direct contact with India, and all they know has been passed from their parents' subjective accounts. Very often the parents are selective in their recounting of the life in India because for them many things are obvious and common, and they do not realise that the children do not have any other reliable source of knowledge. Thus the parents omit the seemingly unimportant everyday details, and the children are presented with a 'tourist guide version' of India.

The occasions when the children get in touch with the rest of the Indian community are not so rare but the experience is still insufficient. For the parents, festivals, ceremonies and celebrations are a welcomed opportunity to converse in their native language with other Indian immigrants and create an illusion of India for a limited period of time. The children usually suffer on such occasions: they are bored, they dread the food, and sometimes hamburgers and pizzas are ordered for them (Lahiri, 65), they do not understand the language, and they certainly would have more fun playing with their American friends. The mainstream society and culture are more attractive to the children because they can get a direct experience 'hands-on.'

Even if the parents arrange the first-hand experience, and they take their children to India, it is not necessarily a solution to the problem. In Lahiri's novel, the trip to India failed completely in its purpose to raise the awareness of the children. For Gogol and his sister, Sonia, India is simply a memory to be discarded after their return back to the US:

Gogol and Sonia sleep for as long as they want, watch television, make themselves peanut butter and jelly sandwiches at any time of day. [...] They take hot showers, speak to each other in English, ride their bicycles around the neighbourhood. They call up their American friends, who are happy enough to see them but ask them nothing about where they've been. And so the eight months are put behind them, quickly shed, quickly forgotten, like clothes worn for a special occasion, or for a season that has passed, suddenly cumbersome, irrelevant to their lives. (Lahiri, 87-88)

The time they spent in India is remarkable: eight months. Moreover, they spent the whole time amidst the large Indian families of their parents, and they were often accompanied by relatives and family friends on their trips. However, the experience has only a marginal value for the children, and Gogol does not reflect it in the formation of his identity. The desire of the first generation to return back to the homeland and refresh the connection with their roots is completely absent in Gogol's life. He has become accustomed to the American environment to such extent that he considers himself an American who was on a trip to India. His place of birth is the US, and he is expected to be loyal to his homeland. He is the example of a general trend among the members of the second generation: this generation has left India behind with only an occasional glance backwards.

While the parents are still painfully aware of the lack of 'genuine India' and they miss their large families and relatives, their children are already anchored in America and behave accordingly. Gogol's attitudes illustrate the generation gap: "Lately, he's been lazy; addressing his parents in English though they continue to speak to him in Bengali. Occasionally he wanders through the house with his running sneakers on. At dinner he sometimes uses a fork" (Lahiri, 75). Obviously his parents never wear their shoes in the house and they eat with their fingers. Gogol (and the other second generation Indian-Americans) also gains confidence in situations where the parents feel uncertain because they are used to a different cultural and social environment.

Sometimes, the second generation Indian-Americans adopt the exoticist approach towards India. They lack the first-hand experience of India that their parents share, and they idolize the country under the exoticist influence. At the beginning of Divakaruni's novel, Rakhi is convinced that India is a country full of wonders, exciting secrets and mystery because she does not have sufficient and

correct information. In spite of the lack of reliable knowledge, and in full accordance with the exoticist stereotypes, Rakhi tries to include in her identity the 'special' Indian aspects. Divakaruni uses Rakhi's coffee shop as a metaphor of the process. When the business is threatened by a competitive café, her mother gives Rakhi a priceless piece of advice:

"The reason you don't have enough power to fight that woman [manager of the other coffee shop] there, is that she knows exactly who she is, and you don't. This isn't a real cha shop but a mishmash, a Westerner's notion of what's Indian." (Divakaruni, 89)

In an angry outburst Rakhi accuses her mother that it is her fault because she has always completely ignored Rakhi's wish to hear about India. Her mother offers an apologetic explanation, and at the same time makes Rakhi realise how tremendously complicated the issue is:

"I thought it would protect you if I didn't talk about the past. That way you wouldn't be constantly looking back, hankering, like so many immigrants do. I didn't want to be like those other mothers, splitting you between here and there, between your life right now and that which can never be. But by not telling you about India as it really was, I made it into something far bigger." (Divakaruni, 89)

Rakhi later abandons the exoticist stereotypes, redecorates her shop, and reconstructs her identity. She realises that passive adoption of traditions and values is not sufficient and cannot serve as a source of self-awareness. After she actively tries to bring together the different elements of the Indian tradition with the American mainstream culture she discovers a way to reconstruct her identity. After the initial confusion, she is able to develop her identity by selecting elements of both cultures and combining them consciously in a mosaic.

By the comparison of Gogol and Rakhi, a major difference becomes apparent. While Rakhi tries to preserve the Indian heritage (even though in an exoticist way), Gogol gradually abandons the world of the first generation and separates himself from India. In the novels, the preservation of the Indian culture, heritage, and roots is contrasted to the increasing assimilation and acculturation in the mainstream society. The problems related to the two opposing processes are discussed in the following chapter.

5 Expectations of the Indian-Americans

After the arrival in the US, the clash with the new culture, values and social environment provokes a reaction among the first generation of immigrant to protect their identity and background. The preservation of the Indian heritage is an issue connected to stereotypes created by and about the Indian-American community and also about the life in the US. The adherence to a stereotyped way of life is often expected by the Indian community as a source of protection and self-determination. It is also the source of tension between the first and second generation of Indian-Americans because their attitudes and expectations differ—and the difference is sometimes enormous. Each generation also constructs identity differently: the first relies heavily on the Indian substratum, while the second focuses on the American environment. Both generations create and maintain certain stereotypes about themselves and about the life in the US. The perpetuation or disruption of these stereotypes depends on several factors.

The first generation remains deeply attached to the culture, traditions, and lifestyle of India. They define themselves linguistically, religiously and culturally. To a certain degree, they create a stereotypical version of themselves (and the authors use the schematic picture in the novels): they appear as old-fashioned, traditional, first generation immigrants deeply immersed in the world of India, and coping with the life in the US only with difficulties. Links with India are maintained by visits and financial support. Loyalty to Indian roots is a major issue for the first generation.

Members of the second generation born in the US have a more complex attitude towards India. Gogol's dissent is an example of one possible reaction. Rakhi's initial uncritical excitement is the other extreme. Somewhere in the middle are those who "cultivate pride in their cultural and ethnic inheritance [but] they try very hard to blend into the mainstream" (Report, 173). The influence of their parents—even if it is supposed to help and support the children—is often perceived as an obstacle. The identity of the second generation Indian-Americans also includes elements of the American environment because they grow up and mature under direct influence of the American society and lifestyle.

The second generation Indian-Americans often fail to fulfil the expectations of their parents and the whole community. Typically, they are confused about these

expectations and what is demanded from them. Stereotypes, which are maintained by their parents in the hope of the possibility to preserve their (Indian) identity intact in a new environment, are no longer functional for the second generation. On the contrary, these stereotypes restrain their unchecked interaction within the mainstream culture and society, where they feel they fully belong. The second generation Indian-Americans gradually abandon most of the Indian traditions, but they often create stereotypes of their own. In the novels, the most prominent is the image of the life in the US, and the schematisation of the country in general.

The Indian immigrants arrive in the US with certain ideas and images of their new country. Their expectations are based on the success stories of their relatives or friends, they are fuelled by the notion of the American dream, and they always include prospects of great future in a country where the sky is the limit. Very often the younger Indian immigrants look forward to casting off old-fashioned traditions that seem to restrict their choices in life. Percy, a colleague of Sorab, summarizes it in his speech:

“That’s why we came to America in the first place, right? To have the freedom to chase women and get loaded whenever we wanted to? After all, isn’t that what the pursuit of happiness is all about—the right to down a few pegs of Scotch, to look up the skirts of our long-legged, blond American sisters, to eat enough meat and eggs to raise our cholesterol to new and uncharted heights? Heck, they don’t call it the Promised Land for nothing.” (Umrigar, 52)

It is clear from Percy’s slightly exaggerated account that the Indians often find the new lifestyle incredibly exciting and attractive. However, Percy does not describe America objectively and his speech is full of stereotypes based on the differences between India and the US. Contrary to India where the consumption of alcohol is considered improper and for some religious groups it is entirely forbidden, life in America sets up no such obstacles, apparently. Dark-haired Indian women in decent clothes are substituted by the notorious stereotype of sexy and frivolous blondes. The vegetarian nutrition which is widespread in India makes way for American cuisine, and the consumption of formerly restricted foods is now allowed. To be precise—it is not forbidden. Therefore, the choice is free for each individual, and the pressure of cultural and ritual taboos is loosened. The second generation enjoys the possibility to

cast away parts of the Indian heritage, but at the same time they create and adopt new stereotypes about the life in the US.

The preservation of traditions and customs is necessarily linked to the mainstream society and culture. Some stereotypes are disrupted because they do not serve their purpose in the new environment and because they are difficult to maintain. One such aspect is the disappearance of arranged marriages. Most of the second generation Indian characters in the novels choose to get married to whom they want and when they want without parental interference. During his wedding ceremony Gogol observes:

He thinks of his parents, strangers until this moment, two people who had not spoken until after they were actually wed. Suddenly, [...] he realizes what it means, and he is astonished by his parents' courage, the obedience that must have been involved in doing such a thing.
(Lahiri, 222)

Gogol has chosen his wife freely and independently. His parents did not select a suitable Indian bride for him as would be their task in India, and they have actually never thought about it. For them, the arranged marriage is a tradition so tightly linked to India that neither the first nor the second generation has attempted its transfer to the US. Gogol's mother, Ashima, indirectly reveals the reason of this development in various places throughout the novel. She finds certain ceremonies and rituals unsatisfactory for her liking because her whole family cannot be present. It is also difficult to buy the proper objects necessary for the performance of these rituals in an ordinary American store. She has to improvise and occasionally act on behalf of her relatives who are not available, but whose function in the rituals is vital for the positive result of the procedure. She does not give up completely, but at the same time she does not force her children to follow traditions which cannot be properly maintained. In the case of her family, the practical aspect overrules the strict loyalty to their native culture, and outdated stereotypes are not perpetuated.

However, there is one decision which Ashima will never make, not that it would ever cross her mind: to get a divorce. Gogol, on the other hand, refuses to be bound by tradition in a matter so private and crucial for his personal life:

But fortunately they [Gogol and his wife] have not considered it their duty to stay married, as the Bengalis of Ashoke and Ashima's generation do. They are not willing to accept, to adjust, to settle for

something less than their ideal of happiness. That pressure has given way, in the case of the subsequent generation, to American common sense. (Lahiri, 276)

His practical attitude clearly distinguishes Gogol from the first generation characters. Umrigar's character Percy then proves that Gogol is not the only one, whose decisions disrupt the stereotypical attitudes and show his confidence. Percy has been divorced several times, and after each divorce he pursued another relationship, happily ignoring the fact that they were doomed from the beginning. All the time he has been considered as a valid member of the Indian community, and his private life has not interfered with his social relations.

Generally, Gogol lives in an environment where the Indian heritage is preserved with care and stereotypes abound. His parents cherish their roots, they meet with other members of the Indian-American community, and they visit India on different occasions. Gogol has mixed emotions under these circumstances. He feels that the lifestyle of his parents is too Indian for him, and he wishes to blend into the American way of life. He goes clearly against the expectations of the Indian community. As illustrated above, as a member of the second generation Gogol thinks about himself as an American. His interest for India is lukewarm and maintained only for appearance's sake while he still lives with his parents. As soon as he moves out, first to college, later to his own apartment, he discards the former lifestyle and adopts a different set of values. Such behaviour of the second generation Indian-Americans can now be considered as yet another stereotype. Towards the end of the novel (especially after the death of his father), Gogol becomes aware of the strain his parents had to cope with, and finally realises why it was so important for them to preserve their Indianness. For his parents, the idea of forgetting about their roots and leaving the Indian heritage behind was inconceivable. They did not and could not understand why Gogol would exchange it for the American way of life. Ultimately, Gogol's perspective shifts and he is able to see the complete picture:

He wonders how his parents had done it, leaving their respective families behind, seeing them so seldom, dwelling unconnected in a perpetual state of expectation, of longing. [...] He had spent years maintaining distance from his origins; his parents, in bridging that distance as best they could. (Lahiri, 281)

In the character of Gogol, Lahiri captures the conflicting aspects of the combined Indian-American identity and its construction. She contrasts Gogol's subjective opinion about himself with the assumption of how he is supposed to think about himself. The generalisation does not come from an American source, but it is maintained within the Indian community itself. Gogol feels that he is trapped in a defined and schematised role which he strives to avoid and that leads to a still deeper estrangement. He does not want to participate in his life as designed by the expectations of his parents and the whole community. He does not fit in the Indian environment anymore. When his mother makes him attend a panel discussion about Indian novels, the stereotypes become apparent:

Gogol is bored by the panellists, who keep referring to something called 'marginality,' as if it were some sort of medical condition. [...] Gogol has never heard the term *ABCD*. He eventually gathers that it stands for "American-born confused deshi." In other words, him. He learns that the *C* could also stand for 'conflicted.' He knows that *deshi*, a generic word for 'countryman,' means 'Indian,' knows that his parents and all their friends always refer to India simply as *desh*. But Gogol never thinks of India as *desh*. He thinks of it as Americans do, as India. (Lahiri, 118)

Moreover, Gogol does not think of himself as an *ABCD*.¹⁵ He was born in the United States, speaks fluent English but no Bengali, does not attend Indian festivals because he finds it hypocritical, and prefers living in New York alone to living at home, "to remain unquestionably in their world" (Lahiri, 126). He refuses to comply with the stereotype ascribed to him by the panellists and he disrupts it by constructing his identity differently. At this point, it is relevant to mention the fact that Gogol's rejection has already become a stereotype by itself, and most of the second generation Indian-Americans behave similarly in the novels.

Gogol's future wife Moushumi solved the problem of her double identity ingeniously (and differently than the other second generation characters). She escaped the pressure of both the Indian and American community by immersing herself into an environment not contaminated by either:

¹⁵ The abbreviation *ABCD* has also a different meaning: American Born Child of Deshis. In this context, the stereotyped image of a confused or conflicted second generation Indian-American is handily disrupted. Mari Sekiguchi, *Between ABCD and DCBA: Rise of the New Generation in Asian Indians in the United States*, 15, Mar. 2008 <<http://homepage3.nifty.com/%7Emariamamma/mar-abcd.pdf>>.

Without telling [her parents] she'd pursued a double major in French. Immersing herself in a third language, a third culture, had been her refuge – she approached French, unlike things American or Indian, without guilt, or misgiving, or expectation of any kind. It was easier to turn her back on the two countries that could claim her in favour of the one that had no claim whatsoever. (Lahiri, 214)

The examples of Gogol and Moushumi lead to the conclusion that identity is constructed independently but the process of the construction is subjected to external influences. For the second generation Indian-Americans, the formation of identity requires the abandoning of stereotypes. Their disruption of the old ones can lead to the creation of a new set of schematised expectations and attitudes. Also, the acceptance of the newly-constructed identity by others is a complicated issue. Both the Indian and American societies expect a stereotypical 'product', and failure to fulfil the expectations results in conflicts with both cultures.

The character of Sorab in Umrigar's novel faces another dilemma: his desire to live in America is opposed by the feeling of guilt that he left the Indian world behind. He describes the sensation of being torn between the two worlds to his wife Susan:

“When I first came to this country I used to have these dreams. I would dream that the doorbell in my apartment would ring and I'd answer the door and my parents would be there. [...] But then I'd wake up and realize it was only a dream, that they were actually thousands of miles away, and I'd feel this awful, oppressive feeling. All the lightness of the dream, the ease of possibility, would get wiped out the minute I woke up.” (Umrigar, 135)

Sorab's feeling of guilt is the result of his inability to disrupt certain stereotypes and handle the problem actively. Sorab attempts to reconcile two sets of stereotypes: one, which expects him to think and behave as an Indian, the other, which expects him to start a fresh new life in the US and discard his roots and heritage. The reconciliation is, of course, complicated and demanding. Contrary to Gogol and Moushumi, Sorab does not aim at the disruption of these stereotypes. He tries to create a functional combination that will allow him to enjoy his new life (based on American stereotypes) and still keep in touch with India (and Indian stereotypes). Umrigar exploits the clichés and schematised descriptions also in the character of

Sorab's mother, Tehmina. The images of India and the US, the cultures, societies, and ways of life are highly stylised to fulfil the purpose of 'clean' comparisons.

Sorab's decision to leave India and the effect it has on him and his parents perpetuates several stereotypes but, on the other hand, it is still a contemporary issue which the Indian-American community has to deal with. The decision influences not only Sorab but the lives of his parents, too. His mother's hopes and plans for her son's future are shattered. His father is suddenly facing the prospect of seeing his only son (and only child) only occasionally and only after getting the visa and permission of a third disinterested party. Understandably, Sorab has to cope with the feeling of guilt:

During his early days in America, he had been haunted by the sudden wealth that engulfed him. [...]While he lived in an apartment building where the electricity never failed, and took showers under reliably hot water and breathed air that was crystal clear and sweet, [...] millions of people—including his own mother and father—lived trapped in a hot, polluted, overcrowded, poverty-stricken, crumbling city where the only reliable thing was chaos and unpredictability. (Umrigar, 174-175)

Finally, Sorab becomes content after his family is together again: his newborn son, American wife, and mother in the same house—his house in the US, where they can enjoy the wealth of his American life. Umrigar presents the cliché of a prosperous Indian-American who assumes that problems can be solved by material comfort which the life in India cannot offer. Therefore, after the death of his father, Sorab expects Tehmina to settle down with his family permanently. What he fails to realise is her longing for Bombay as the city where she has spent all her life, where she met, married, and lost her husband, and where she has always felt at home. For Tehmina, the material affluence cannot compensate for the loss. She misses India and often idolises the country in her memories. She creates stereotypes about her life in the past, and she is not able to recreate them in the new environment. On the other hand, Sorab's expectations are also a stereotype: a successful member of the Indian-American community unites his large family Indian-wise in the US. The expectations of Sorab and of his mother are bound to clash. The situation is solved only after both of them realise the necessity to abandon the conventional expectations and they actively construct their lives.

In the novel, Umrigar presents various stereotypes and schematised attitudes which are constructed around the images of the Indian and American cultures, and which are supposed to demonstrate the vast differences between the Indian and American way of life. Tehmina, who looks back at India with nostalgia, often uses stereotypical patterns:

Tehmina had thought that going to America would broaden Sorab's horizons, would make him stand on the shoulders of his parents and see farther than they ever had. But instead [...] Sorab seemed to have shrunk and his world had narrowed. [...] Living in this housing complex, where the layouts of many of the homes were identical and even the cars and the play swings in the backyards all looked the same, Sorab had traded a dull contentment for the intense passion of his boyhood. (Umrigar, 77)

Umrigar often uses the stereotypical contrast between the passion (and haphazardness) of the Indian life and the dullness (and orderliness) of the American way of life. The stereotype of the rational, logical, clean West is set against the emotional, chaotic and dirty East. The US is constructed as a sterile and emotionally impotent country, while India bursts with all kinds of feelings, impressions, colours, noises, and activities. The emotional sterility of the American lifestyle is paired with the outward sterility of the living space. For Tehmina the most unnatural are the supermarkets which she describes as "antiseptic, air-conditioned, clean, brightly lit" (Umrigar, 35) but full of inedible fruit and vegetables of extraordinary size without any real smell or taste. She prefers the farmer's market "built to human scale, a place for ordinary, fallible human beings" (Umrigar, 36). Her distaste for shopping in the supermarket is highlighted by the description of its customers:

How dull, how uniform the people who shopped there looked, much like the houses in their development. Everybody in the supermarket looked healthy and clean and well scrubbed, with none of the individuality and the colourful eccentricities that the shoppers at the market wore on their interesting, multicolored faces. (Umrigar, 36)

The apparently superior American life is confronted with its emptiness and unnatural order. The confrontation relies on Tehmina's stereotypical attitudes, of course, and also on her initial unwillingness to accept the American culture and lifestyle as one possible way of life. However, various differences between India and

the US are truly enormous in reality, and many aspects of the American culture and way of life are confusing or unacceptable for the Indian-Americans.

Alongside, there is a vast amount of things which the Indian-Americans appreciate and value in their new country. It is not only the economic prosperity and favourable financial situation that makes their lives comfortable and enjoyable. They are, however, the source of the most striking differences: “The simple act of eating an ice-cream cone on the streets and not being followed by the hungry eyes of a hundred children was a freedom, a luxury” (Umrigar, 151). When Tehmina softens her initial criticism and becomes aware of the possibilities and future prospects which are available for her in the US, she finally understands why the country is so attractive to her son and other Indian immigrants. At the beginning, she is negative and disapproving but after a very pleasant experience, she is able to recognise the full potential of the country, and herself.

One of the social aspects which Tehmina misses most in the US is the Indian solidarity and cohesion (idealised by her longing for India). In the US she feels isolated and alone, and frustrated by the lack of social contact and her inability to contribute to the life of the community. When she meets the neighbouring family—single mother Tara (irresponsible, uncouth and vulgar) and her two small sons—she finds a chance to become an active participant in the life of the neighbourhood. However, her American daughter-in-law, Susan, is firmly against any involvement with the ‘white trash’ family, and Tehmina contacts and helps the boys virtually in secret. At one point, she finds herself sitting on the fence which divides the backyards, and her jumping into the neighbouring garden is a metaphor of her finally abandoning the stereotyped and revered past. Through her self-realisation she is able to determine her place in the new environment and reconsider her judgments and opinions.

Now, Tehmina perceives the changes which occur among the immigrants differently:

It was amazing the transformation that happened to all these young people when they came here—most of them gained weight, most of them talked louder and laughed louder [...]. But the most amazing thing was, they became happy in America.

(Umrigar, 150-151)

Obviously, the essential condition for such a miraculous change is the age of the immigrants. Usually, older members of the first generation find it more difficult to settle down with ease than the younger and more courageous. It is exactly what happens to Gogol's parents. They are not confident enough in the US but, as Gogol and his sister notice during a visit to India, "within minutes, before their eyes Ashoke and Ashima slip into bolder, less complicated versions of themselves, their voices louder, their smiles wider" (Lahiri, 81). Also, Umrigar's enthusiasm is based on the stereotypical notion of America as a land of unlimited possibilities, and, ultimately, the land where the immigrants can fulfil their American dream.

A final metaphor that sums up the promise of the new country is Tehmina's answer to the question what she likes best about America – making rainbows:

"You know how, in the summer when you're watering the outdoor plants with the water hose, you can sometimes create rainbows? I love that. You see, in Bombay we all live in apartment buildings and none of us have lawns and water hoses or anything like that. So we never get to make our own rainbows." (Umrigar, 247)

The possibility of creating a fleeting piece of beauty while actually wasting water on plants—water, which is so dear in India—expresses the generosity and abundance of the American life. For Tehmina it is the symbol for free, full life in which no restrictions can hinder her way to happiness. Even though she does not like many things in America, and she has only just begun to settle down, the prospect of a future she could never have had in India, is promising.

6 Expectations of the Americans

After the discussion of some of the fundamental issues connected to the assimilation and acculturation of the Indian community, attention will now be paid to the expectations of the American mainstream society and likely areas of tension.

The set of fixed attributes ascribed to India and the Indian-Americans is a product of the combined effects of the exoticist and magisterial approaches. The characteristics which are attributed to India and the Indians by the exoticist approach are based on American feelings of wonder, amusement and condescending superiority. Indian traditions, languages and names are often found diverting. In many cases, the otherness of the Indian characters is observed as an oddity or the means to liven up the routine of everyday life. It serves as a mirror in which the superiority of American standards is confirmed habitually, without considering the real image which the mirror offers. The opinions of the Indian characters are very often treated as amusing, sometimes bizarre, but not really worth respecting. They are disregarded as an anomaly from a different culture not really worth approaching, let alone understanding.

Lahiri offers an excellent example in her novel. The first-born son of the Bengali parents is known at home as Gogol but outside home he bears a different name—in Bengali tradition it is known as the good name. As a small child he has some difficulties with his double-identity, and refuses to respond to his good name, Nikhil, on his first day at the kindergarten. The director (an American woman) bluntly refuses to listen to his father's explanation and concludes the problem in a way most comfortable for her, completely ignoring the Bengali tradition, thus Gogol loses his 'good name' and remains Gogol, which would be absolutely inadmissible in India. However, he readopts the good name as Nick later in his adulthood.

The Indian-American characters and their culture are depicted as a source of interest for the Americans. When Gogol invites his American girlfriend Maxine for a visit at his parents' house, he explains "things he figures she should know in advance [and] the restrictions amuse her. She sees them as a single afternoon's challenge, an anomaly never to be repeated" (Lahiri, 145). Maxine likes the idea of dating a man with an exotic background but she does not accept the background as an essential part of him. It is a source of amusement and excitement for her. It is easy for her to

dismiss traditions she does not understand or which she finds absurd. Gogol also makes it easy for her by rejecting his heritage and separating himself from his family's lifestyle. With Maxine he thinks he is free until he realises that "it is dependence, not adulthood, he feels. He feels free of expectation, of responsibility, in willing exile from his own life" (Lahiri, 141). Sometimes he is also regarded as a curiosity. During a conversation at his birthday party organized by Maxine and her mother Lydia, an American woman tells a story about her friend who visited India. When Gogol asks about the destination of the trip she answers:

"I don't know. All I remember is that she came back thin as a rail, and that I was horribly envious of her." Pamela laughs. "But you must be lucky that way. [...] You must never get sick."

"Actually, that's not true," he says, slightly annoyed. "We get sick all the time. We have to get shots before we go. My parents devote the better part of a suitcase to medicine."

"But you're Indian," Pamela says, frowning. "I'd think the climate wouldn't affect you, given your heritage."

"Pamela, Nick's American," Lydia says. "He was born here." (Lahiri, 157)

Gogol's identity, origin, and name are reduced to conversation topics without being considered seriously. Gogol "has come to hate questions pertaining to his name, hates having constantly to explain. He hates having to tell people that it doesn't mean anything *in Indian*." (Lahiri, 75) The exoticist feelings of wonder and excitement largely motivate the interest of the American mainstream society. For the Indian-American characters, it is difficult to escape such limitations.

However, the opinions and attitudes of the American mainstream society are challenged in the novels. Umrigar introduces a woman called Eva Metzenbaum, a friend of Tehmina. Eva is capable of ignoring the mainstream point of view due to the fact that she is Jewish, i.e. she has her own experience with unpleasant generalizations. Therefore she becomes Tehmina's best friend and helps her cope with the American reality. Umrigar also endows Eva with sharp wit and good observation skills, thus putting her into the position of a critic outside the Indian community. It is not possible to call Eva objective, but her viewpoint is free from any links to India or Indianness. She is also well aware of the damages created by the seemingly perfect American way of life:

“What can you expect, Tammy? [...] These white people –they’re good at making the buses run on time. Everything else, anything that needs a ticking heart, forget it.”

“But *you’re* white,” Tehmina protested.

“Yes, but not white like Susan. Not like my daughter-in-law. I’m more like you, Tammy. I know the world is made of blood and pus and sweat and shit. And I’m not afraid of that.” (Umrigar, 34)

The ideal picture of the US is subverted, as well as the racial division of white and non-white. At the same time, certain racial issues still prevail because of the lack of education, reliable information, and prejudice.

In the novels, the American majority perceives the Indian characters as members of a solid, unified and clearly defined ethnic group. The usual misconception includes the assumption that all the Indians share the same stereotypical attributes. That is, of course, a misleading opinion. In Divakaruni’s novel, such oversimplification has a very violent outcome. A young Sikh man is mistaken for an al-Qaeda terrorist only on the grounds of his turban, and he is brutally attacked together with a group of his friends. The search for those who are responsible for the attacks of 9/11 leads to a very dangerous situation when all the Indian characters are homogenized under the sinister label ‘potentially dangerous.’ The attempts to soothe the shock fail which Divakaruni brilliantly describes:

People she’s [Rakhi, the main character] never seen before tell her how sorry they are that she’s had such a terrible experience. They declare that they welcome her presence in their community. She tries to be appreciative but only ends up resentful. They make her feel like a guest.

I was born here, she wants to tell them. (Divakaruni, 275)

Rakhi experiences a racially motivated threat, which has also a confusing effect on the process of the construction of her identity. Personally, she knows who she is, even though she struggled with self-awareness at first. But now the American majority doubts her identity. Rakhi does not meet the ‘requirements’ (colour of her skin, first of all) and is not considered American—as if it indicated a unified and generally accepted definition.

The expectations and stereotypes of the American majority are predetermined by several aspects: the already mentioned exoticist and magisterial approaches play an important part. Also, the simplistic dichotomy of the West and the East influences the opinion of the American majority. The desire for clear divisions and definitions (which may be the legacy of empiricism and rationalism) figure in the process of forming of the expectations as well. In the novels there are numerous examples of the clichés and misconceptions pertaining to the minority. Some of the most frequent are:

- Indians are poor.
- They are vegetarian, and their cuisine is eccentric.
- In general, their customs and traditions are odd.
- A small part of the American majority eyes them with suspicion as potential terrorists, especially after 9/11.

As all the novels show, the diversity of the Indian community is immense and the above stated stereotypes can be disproved with ease. However, on some occasions, the American characters are unwilling to admit the absurdity of their claims, at which point the tensions between the two cultures rise. The most dangerous of the stereotypes is the 'possible terrorist threat' situation, which has its roots in the magisterial approach. In these cases, the incongruity of the two cultures is perceived by the American characters as a defect on the Indian side. Moreover, Indian characters, their culture and customs are observed with poorly hidden suspicion and racial prejudice. They are not compatible with the standards and demands of the American society, and are condemned or attacked. The magisterial stance, and at times pure racism, is pronounced especially in Divakaruni's novel.

The most common assumptions about the Indian community as depicted in the novels and the reactions of the Indian characters will now be discussed.

6.1 Poverty

The image of India as a poor country where the majority of population lives in villages and works in agriculture needs to be modified with regards to the recent boom in specialised industries, outsourcing, and investments. The idea that the Indians migrate to the US to gain better economic and financial standards also

requires more consideration. Often the Indian immigrants come to the US to start their own business (predominantly in the IT sector), and they achieve rapid success, which they are able to perform in India as well after establishing a branch of their company there. They do not come to the US because they would not be able to become rich in India. Their motivation is based on the fact that “corruption is rampant and unchecked in India. This has a major impact on their perceptions and attitudes as they contrast life in the US and in India” (Report, 172). Success in America comes relatively fast and does not *cost* so much as in India.

The bulk of immigrants from India is far from homogeneous. The majority of immigrants do improve their living conditions after they settle in the US. Lahiri, however, readily subverts the impression that this may be a Pan-Indian development. Ashima Ganguli and her husband Ashoke are an example of members of the wealthy Indian middle class whose both families had staff in the household. For the wife, the move to the US has certainly meant discomfort and decline in the quality of life:

Until now Ashima has accepted that there is no one to sweep the floor, or do the dishes, or wash clothes, or shop for groceries, or prepare a meal on the days she is tired or homesick or cross. She has accepted that the very lack of such amenities is the American way. (Lahiri, 32)

For Ashima, the loss of previous standards is all the more frustrating, since now she is the housewife and has to take care of everything herself. The only help her husband offers is an occasional cup of tea, “the only thing he can think to do for her, the last thing she feels like drinking” (Lahiri, 32). Tehmina also recollects with nostalgia the never-ending procession of fishermen, washer men, vendors of snacks (and occasional beggars) who visited her household in Bombay. For both women, the life in the US must feel isolated from the outside world, lonely and sterile.

There is another aspect usually associated with poverty and poor living conditions and that is the image of filth. It is undeniable that India is a dirty country, where heaps of rubbish decompose on the streets, the sewer system is insufficient, dust abounds, and water is a highly risky fluid. But—and it should be written in capitals—individual households are (perhaps surprisingly) clean and well-kept. Although certain elements of private hygiene are truly unacceptable for the Western visitor, it must be remembered that the perception of normality depends on tradition and habit. It is always easier to point out the repulsive aspects as they can be better

contrasted to the Western standards. The similarities tend to be accepted automatically.

Lahiri paints a different picture of life in 'clean America'. She places Ashima in some very disappointing situations: "her first real glimpse of America [is] leafless trees with ice-covered branches, dog urine and excrement embedded in the snowbanks" (Lahiri, 30). Later she finds roaches in the bathroom "emerging at night from the cracks in the tiles" (Lahiri, 30). A visit to their landlords' apartment fills her with horror:

Just beyond the ceiling yet so different from her own, piles everywhere, piles of books and papers, piles of dirty plates on the kitchen counter, ashtrays the size of serving platters heaped with crushed-out cigarettes.

The girls slept together on a bed piled with clothes. (Lahiri, 31-32)

Tehmina notices another aspect of America's cleanness—it exceeds into sterility. She dislikes the antiseptic world in which "people at gyms sprayed their seats each time they rose from a machine, as if human sweat was more dangerous than the chemicals they sprayed" (Umrigar, 78). She finds the obsession irrational and harmful because it destroys not only germs but also emotions and feelings. People tend not to get their hands dirty or their hearts passionate.

Moreover, Tehmina's observations highlight the contrasts in the seemingly perfect, wealthy and clean American reality. When she first gets a closer look at her neighbour's sons, she is in for a surprise: "the boys' white faces also had streaks of black, as if they'd spent the afternoon cleaning chimneys. Gazing at their necks, she saw lines of gritty black" (Umrigar, 13). Afterwards, her inner thoughts wander back to India:

She remembered how, when her car drove past the slums in Bombay, she often saw groups of slum women returning to their homes, carrying large copper pots of water on their heads. From the same pot of water they probably cooked, washed their dishes, and bathed their children. So why was it that here in America, where everyone had running water [...], there were still children who looked like Jerome and Joshua? (Umrigar, 13-14)

Thus, the first from the set of clichés about the Indian community is subverted effectively. Judging the individual immigrant solely on the grounds of how his country

of origin looks like is absurd. Dirty streets and poor people can be found all over the world and there is no reason why India should forever be the prime example of both.

6.2 Cuisine

India is a country with the largest Hindu population in the world estimated at 79%.¹⁶ Probably the most familiar aspect of the Hindu faith is the sanctity of the cow. More than 750 million of Indians will not kill the animal, harm it in any way, or eat beef. With such high number in the statistics, it is tempting to draw a sloppy conclusion that Indians are basically all Hindu and vegetarians. Under the influence of various popular movements like Hare Krishna Society, whose members are strictly vegetarian, the conclusion seems almost justified. As the novels show, it may not be always true.

National cuisine represents a rather mundane topic. The food you eat seems to lack any real importance in the formative process during the construction of individual identity. However, all three novels show that Indian cuisine is an inseparable part of the Indian lifestyle. Cooking and eating is mostly done in private and is the least affected by the mainstream. It is incomparably easier to remain wholly Indian in the kitchen than in the outside world. Also, there are many regulations and restrictions connected with food and cooking in the Indian environment: lists of foods that are 'clean' and proper to eat, others that are 'unclean' and banned, cooking procedures, which exclude ageing of cheeses and often even the left-overs from the previous day. Some of these features are so typically Indian that they cannot be omitted while discussing the Indian mentality and identity.

Obviously, not all Indians are vegetarian. Their Americans friends expect them to be, as in the case of the Gangulis' landlord and his wife:

Ashima [prepared] the biryani, the carp in yogurt sauce, the dal, the six different vegetable dishes. [...] They've invited Alan and Judy from upstairs. [...] Judy eyes the buffet, bites into something that turns out to be a shrimp cutlet. "I thought Indians were supposed to be vegetarian," she whispers to Alan. (Lahiri, 39)

¹⁶ "The Largest Hindu Communities," 9 Apr. 2008
<http://www.adherents.com/largecom/com_hindu.html>.

Judy's reaction suggests that she is disappointed in the Gangulis because they have failed to confirm her expectations. She does not realise that being Indian does not necessarily mean eating vegetarian.

For the first generation of Indian-Americans, food represents an opportunity to recreate a little bit of India in the kitchen. Rakhi's mother has kept Indian cooking as the only tradition in her new life. For Tehmina, shopping in the market embodies a precious moment of feeling as if she was back at home. For Gogol's parents, their son's birthday "like most events in his life is another excuse [...] to throw a party for their Bengali friends" (Lahiri, 72). Ashima finds the preparations quite exciting:

[She] cooks for days beforehand, cramming the refrigerator with stack of foil-covered trays. She makes sure to prepare his favorite things: lamb curry with lots of potatoes, luchis, thick channa dal with swollen brown raisins, pineapple chutney, sandeshes molded out of saffron-tinted ricotta cheese. All this is less stressful to her than the task of feeding a handful of American children, half of whom always claim they are allergic to milk, all of whom refuse to eat crusts of their bread. (Lahiri, 72)

The enumeration of various Indian dishes sounds almost magical. Cooking is raised to the position of a ritual through which the Indianness is confirmed and perpetuated.

Divakaruni uses a similar technique in her novel. With the help of Indian food, Rakhi is finally able to find out what she was missing in her life and construct her identity without falling into the exoticist trap. Also, it helps her to fight effectively with the competitive coffee house and get a fresh start in business:

They have decided to transform the Chai House into an Indian snack shop, a chaer dokan, as it would be called in Calcutta. They're going to model it after the shop her father worked in so many years ago. [...] He'll cook the snacks himself. He lists them on a sheet of paper: Pakora, singara, sandesh, jilebi, beguni, nimki, mihidana. (Divakaruni, 165)

Rakhi finds her way into the Indian cuisine with the help of her father. Other second generation characters are quite happy to eat the meals but are unable to cook them themselves. Their lack of interest prevents them from participating in the ritual of recreation of India, which takes place in their mother's kitchens. The issue is

linked to their inevitable shift from India towards America. Rakhi's friend Belle is a good example of what Divakaruni calls 'the vegetable guilt'. Her parents sent her a large box "filled with packets and jars, [...] mustard greens, mulee, lauki squash" (Divakaruni, 157), which Belle views with disbelief:

"I don't know how to cook any of this – and my mother knows it. [...] Look at all these spices: cumin, red chilies, bay leaves. A whole bottle of chickpea flour. I've never used chickpea flour in my life."
(Divakaruni, 157)

Members of the second generation are under the American influence since their childhood. They are familiar with the traditional Indian cuisine which they eat at home but they also belong to the American mainstream—and they accept their new environment completely, including the hamburgers, barbecues, and alcoholic beverages.

Yet some of the eating habits and customs connected with food are embedded so deeply that they do not vanish with the second generation. They are often linked to the idea of ritual cleanness. The second generation characters do not always observe these rules themselves, but they notice their absence within the American culture.

At one point in the novel, Gogol is spending the evening with his American girlfriend Maxine at her parents' house. He is asked to set the table for dinner and he "does as he is told, aware that he is touching the everyday possessions of a family he barely knows" (Lahiri, 132-133). In India he would not be allowed to even enter the kitchen, in America he is allowed to soil the purity of some of the most intimate objects—cutlery which is put directly into the mouth. Of course, in India there would not be any cutlery because the safest way to avoid the breach of the ritual is to eat with the fingers.

Lahiri observes another feature of table manners which is different in India and America. It is the hospitality, or more precisely the attention that is paid to the guests invited for dinner. Gogol notices the amount of care Maxine's mother Lydia devoted to the preparation of dinner but at the same time he is struck by the meagre selection and lack of attention paid to him:

His own mother would never have served so few dishes to a guest. She would have kept her eyes trained on Maxine's plate, insisting she have seconds and then thirds. The table would have been lined with a row of

serving bowls so that people could help themselves. But Lydia pays no attention to Gogol's plate. [...] At one point [Lydia] slices off a generous portion of her meat and feeds it to [the dog] off of her palm. (Lahiri, 133)

The fact that the host shares dinner with an animal which is present inside the house while people are eating crowns the whole situation. A similar observation regarding the attention paid to the guests is found in Umrigar's novel, too. Tehmina is very uncomfortable with the American indifference at the table:

After all her visits to America, she was still appalled at the practice of not urging—even forcing—guests to help themselves to seconds. [...] The thought of not pressing guests to help themselves to more food was as alien to her as eating with their hands was to most Americans. (Umrigar, 163-164)

Tehmina finds great comfort and warmth in the company of her Jewish friend, Eva, and her husband, Solomon, because their eating habits are very much the same she is used to. She feels most at ease within a culture as non-American as the Indian culture is:

The only exception to this [American habit] occurred when they had dined at Eva's home during their last visit. Even Solomon had fussed around them just as if they were in Bombay, filling their glasses with wine each time they took a sip, while Eva heaped food onto their plates without asking for permission. Susan had hated it, had declared that it was the height of rudeness, but Tehmina had basked in the warmth behind the gesture. (Umrigar, 164)

Susan finds offensive exactly the same tradition which Tehmina approves of most. It happens not only around the table. Clashes and tensions are numerous, and in some situations, it is very difficult for the characters to find enough tolerance and kindness both in themselves and in their surroundings. Each of them wants to lead his or her life according to his/her best opinion and to remain honest and sincere. On the other hand, in many situations, it is immensely demanding to stay aloof and not to get involved in arguments and hassle. Next chapter addresses the issues which may create tension between the Indian and American culture based on several prominent differences between them as perceived by the characters in the novel.

6.3 Unfamiliarity

Generally, every time two people meet, they tend to find out what they share in common, and in what aspects they differ. On a much larger scale, the same applies to cultures. The outcome of their mutual comparison depends on their ability to assess both the positive and negative features, on the willingness to admit their weakness and acquiesce that the other culture may possess its own strengths. The whole process of confrontation depends on the external conditions—whether peaceful or violent. Usually there is not much willingness to allow the opponent full play to show his superiority if he is supposed to be subdued or defeated. Under normal, i.e. peaceful and tolerant, conditions the process can undoubtedly enrich both participants, and the acculturation can bring beneficial results.

Of course, the situation is never ideal. Third-world countries are looked down upon and sweeping generalisations abound. Rich and developed countries adopt the position of mentors and critics which is often the result of their previous colonial superiority. When 'the West' truly wants to offer a helping hand, paradoxically it can have counterproductive results. In some African countries, the flow of help and support actually prevented the development of local self-reliance, and lead to the emergence of pathological power structures, which misuse the situation further.

Nowadays, most of the harmful and dangerous opinions do not gain support and do not belong into the civilized society. However, in the agitated and slightly hysterical atmosphere after the terrorist attacks of 9/11, there has been an escalation of hostile feelings and fear. In her novel, Divakaruni deals with these issues, and Umrigar and Lahiri address the constantly surviving mistrust and concern with strange and foreign elements entering the American mainstream culture. The attitudes of the American society are described through the experience of the Indian-American characters who are aware that some aspects of their culture are viewed with curiosity while others are disregarded.

The Indian community is certainly different from the American majority. The immigrants differ in the way they dress, eat, speak, think, and behave. Ashima Ganguli's observations cover a whole range of situations and details and offer a complex picture of the Indian culture in the larger scope of America. When Ashima is taken to hospital to give birth to Gogol, Lahiri uses the plot as an introduction to the subtleties of the Indian customs and culture. At the same time she shows a sort of

clumsiness of Ashima's American counterparts, or uneasiness, which the meeting of two cultures presents:

On the maternity floor [Ashima] is asked to remove her Murshidabad silk sari in favour of a flowered cotton gown that, to her mild embarrassment, only reaches her knees. A nurse offers to fold up the sari but, exasperated by the six slippery yards, ends up stuffing the material into Ashima's slate blue suitcase. (Lahiri, 2)

The American custom of giving birth in a hospital is strange for Ashima because "in India [...] women go home to their parents to give birth, away from husbands and in-laws and household cares, retreating briefly to childhood when the baby arrives" (Lahiri, 4). Many of the rules concerning the Indian family life are also totally new to the Americans. Ashima "refuses, for propriety's sake, to utter [her husband's] first name. It's not the type of thing Bengali wives do. [...] A husband's name is something intimate and therefore unspoken, cleverly patched over" (Lahiri, 2). The problem of personal names occurs again when Ashima and Ashoke are forced to choose the name of their son in order to compile the hospital birth certificate. Even though they try to explain that the ritual of naming a child in India is far more complicated and cannot be rushed, they have to submit to the American bureaucracy. They are given a well-meant advice that they can name the child after themselves. However:

This isn't possible, Ashima and Ashoke think to themselves. 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. (Lahiri, 28)

Finally, Ashoke decides to call his son Gogol because the name has a very deep meaning for him. Ashima agrees even though the name is very unusual. They do not worry about its strange sound in combination with their Indian surname because it is only a provisional name, a pet name which is not supposed to be recorded officially. The real name for the outside world, also called the good name, will be given to Gogol later in life to "appear on envelopes, on diplomas, in telephone directories, and in all other public places" (Lahiri, 26). However, the discrepancy

between the customs of India and America finally dooms Gogol to keep his pet name as his good name. Only after he comes of age he can have his name changed to Nikhil. In addition to that, the majority of the Indian characters have their names altered or they get nicknames from the Americans: Nikhil becomes Nick, Rakhi Rikki or Riks, Tehmina is Tammy, and her grandson Cavas is Cookie.

It is not only the name which sets Gogol and the other Indian characters apart from their American friends, schoolmates, and colleagues. It is also the language they speak. All Indian-American characters of the first generation speak perfect or almost perfect English but they still use their native language among themselves as well. The Indian-Americans of the second generation abandon the mother tongue because it has no real value for them. However, as the story of Rakhi shows, it is often with the help of the native language that their identity is confirmed. She has to rely on her father's translations of the diaries she found after her mother's death because they are written in Bengali. Through them she gains an access to the culture she has always wanted to explore and through the information she obtains from the diaries she is able to transform herself and find her true identity.

Household affairs are another area where the American and Indian way does not agree. Strict observance of traditional customs is amusing for the Americans, as when Gogol explains the rules to his girlfriend Maxine. Ashima notices many intolerable things in the American houses which she can never allow in her own: "Shoes are worn inside, trays of cat litter are placed in the kitchens, dogs bark and jump when Ashima and Ashoke ring the bell" (Lahiri, 51). On the other hand, the American obsession with sterility and hygiene as depicted in Umrigar's novel is the cause of tension between Susan, Sorab and Tehmina.

The problem culminates in a fight between Sorab and his wife. Earlier, Tehmina had gone to the market and brought fruit and vegetables which Susan had also bought on her way back from work. Then Tehmina failed Susan's expectation because she had not vacuum cleaned the house. On top, Tehmina never cleans the bathtub after a shower, and that drives Susan mad. When she complains about Tehmina to Sorab, he loses his temper:

Do you realize that my mother spent—wasted—her entire youth cooking and taking care of five other people? He wanted to say to Susan. [...] Surely she has earned the right to relax in her own son's home? As for not rinsing out the tub each time, my mother lives in an

apartment that has not seen a fresh coat of paint in twenty years. It's not meanness, Susan, it's just that the thought doesn't even occur to her. (Umrigar, 60)

His attempt to clear things out goes amiss, however, because "some differences were so great that they were beyond language, beyond explanation" (Umrigar, 60). The fight culminates when Susan insists again on proper cleaning: "I know you think I'm being too nitpicky about the house. I know you don't get it, my need for a clean bathroom and a neat house" (Umrigar, 63). Sorab feels offended and reacts angrily: "Susan, please stop treating me like I'm some third-world bumpkin" (Umrigar, 63). At this moment Susan wonderfully summarizes the problem:

"We were talking about the house and suddenly you've brought race and global politics into it. [...] And what the color of your skin has to do with my not wanting hair in my damn bathtub when I take a shower, I don't know." (Umrigar, 63)

Umrigar often uses the notion of cleanness and sterility to contrast the American culture with its vivid and colourful Indian opposite. On the other hand, the question of tolerance remains unsolved. Susan—as the lady of the house—has every right to manage the household her way, but she is required to balance it with appropriate hospitality towards Tehmina. Tehmina—as the guest—can enjoy the comfort and attention she is given, but she also has to realise the fact that some traits of her culture are not welcome. To what extent is Tehmina supposed to adjust her lifestyle? It is a very painful situation for her because she knows that the pressure on Sorab increases every day. Finally, after she makes her decision to live in the US permanently, she also defines her own conditions, the most important of which is her own place to live, so that she does not have to compromise.

It is obvious that the process of assimilation and acculturation is long, complicated, and often difficult for both sides, not only the Indians. Some aspects of the Indian culture are inevitably suppressed, and some parts of the American culture are never adopted. The situation is easier for the second generation of Indian-Americans because they have grown up surrounded only by the American reality, so the choices are far simpler. The third generation, in this case Tehmina's grandson Cookie, already mixes the two cultures inherently: his father is Indian-American, his mother is American, his closest family now lives in the US. He will probably think of India as the country of his ancestors, but his life will be firmly set in America.

6.4 Racism

The previous chapter has shown the wide range of differences between the Indian and American culture. It has also tried to demonstrate that there is always a solution to the problem of fitting into the mainstream. Each side has to be aware of the other, and tolerance must be priority number one. However, this is not always true. The American characters often dismiss Indian traditions as an oddity and, as there is safety in numbers, they usually do not reconsider their attitudes—they are the majority. Unfortunately, the dismissal sometimes changes into violent negation and racism.

First, the term ‘casual racism’ as introduced in Umrigar’s novel will be discussed. It is not the aggressive kind of racism, usually associated with violence and attacks. It is racism in the everyday life, the kind that gets expressed in conversations, remarks, and sneers. Tehmina is confronted with it as an observer during a conversation Susan leads with Tara. The subject of their rather unpleasant talk is Tara’s unacceptable behaviour with her sons. She had them waiting for her locked out from the house in the cold. After Susan’s remark that such thing is against the law, Tara retorts:

“Hey, I know damn well what the law says. I don’t need nobody to teach me the law. I’ve lived in this country my whole life, so believe me, I know what’s what and...” [...]

“What did you mean by that remark?” Susan asked [...].

“Hey, hey, don’t lose it, lady. I didn’t mean nothing by that remark. I mean, I wasn’t even thinking of you being married to a foreigner. [...] I got nothing against Indian people or Chinese people or black people.”
(Umrigar, 19)

Tara is clearly a poorly educated person with disorderly life and immature opinions, yet her remarks shock Tehmina nonetheless. She realises that not only she or Sorab may face such situations, but it also touches Susan’s life. She has married a foreigner, and for some people it means that she has made a wrong choice, especially since the foreigner looks foreign at first sight. Tara’s feeble explanation

only reveals the racial stereotypes in her thinking; indeed, she does distinguish people primarily by their colour.

Another example of casual racism is shown in the conversation between Rakhi and the manager from the competitive coffee shop. The manager asks for a snack and also demands to know “what’s in it”. Rakhi explains and gets the following reply:

“I think I could handle that. I hope you didn’t mind me asking, but foreigners sometimes put – uh – unusual ingredients in their food. And, oh yes, I’d like a cup of good American tea, if you have any.”

(Divakaruni, 221)

It is impossible not to see the insult. Rakhi and her friend Belle are labelled as foreigners even though both of them were born in the US and belong to those whose lifestyle is more or less American. Also the traditional Indian cuisine is denounced and mistrusted. The final request for good *American* tea is a blatant provocation. Belle’s reaction is amused laughter, while Rakhi is very upset and brings the desired snack with the hottest chutney available as a small personal revenge. It is important to emphasize that not a single violent reaction occurs in the novels on behalf of the Indian characters. However, their American counterparts are not so graceful.

Violent and aggressive racism is depicted in final chapters of Divakaruni’s novel—it is the only one which includes the period of and after 9/11. Rakhi decides against her ex-husband’s advice to keep the coffee shop open on the day of the terrorist attacks: “You mean [...] that closing is the only way we can show we care?” (Divakaruni, 257). Her father approves of her decision and supports her:

“We can’t close the shop. [...] Especially today. For a lot of our customers, it’s their only meeting place. If we’re upset and worried, so must they be. We owe it to them to stay open so they can come in and talk about what’s happened, draw support from each other. Maybe we can help them deal with the shock.” (Divakaruni, 257)

In his altruistic mood, Rakhi’s father is clearly above any racial or cultural division, and he is concerned about the well-being of all customers. Neither he nor Rakhi understands the bitter reality that during a single day, this open-minded attitude ceased to exist among a large group of Americans. Others are aware that something is changing and perceive the general uneasiness. Mr Soto, the owner of the neighbouring Mexican restaurant warns Rakhi that people are “angry and scared –that’s dangerous mix” (Divakaruni, 264). He also reminds Rakhi to display her

sympathy with the American nation, and in disbelief she sees “a big banner hanging from the storefront [proclaiming] PROUD TO BE AMERICAN. [...] There’s a large American flag taped to the inside of his window. Under it a sign in red, white and blue reads GOD BLESS AMERICA” (Divakaruni, 264). At this moment, Belle grows uneasy and suggests that they also should show solidarity that way. Rakhi firmly refuses:

“Belle, I don’t have to put up a flag to prove that I’m American! I’m American already. I love this country – hell, it’s the only country I know. But I’m not going to be pressured into putting up a sign to announce that love to every passerby.” (Divakaruni, 264)

In her opinion, Rakhi has already expressed that she cares by opening her coffee shop and offering a place of calm and peace. Also, she cannot comprehend the need to confirm her loyalty to a nation while she is already a full member of it. Most importantly, she is absolutely innocent and has nothing in common with the terrorists. Tragically, some people associate her with them solely on the basis of her skin colour.

As the evening passes, a group of regular customers arrive. They are friends of Rakhi’s father: musicians and singers from India and other countries. Rakhi notices that “instead of kurtas and loose pants, dashikis and fez hats, today they’re dressed in jeans, T-shirts. A 49ers cap” (Divakaruni, 264). Out of fear and disquiet, they drop a part of their culture to avoid possible conflicts, and they put on American-style clothes as mimicry. It is a desperate attempt to differentiate themselves from the terrorists in their traditional costumes. In an extremely sensitive atmosphere; even clothes are regarded as a proof of evil intentions.

Everybody is stricken by the tragedy of the day. In order to sooth the grief and calm down feelings of panic, the musicians instinctively follow one of the traditions of their native country because in the American culture there is no such tool:

[O]ne of the old men begins a low chant, a drawn-out mourning song, or maybe a prayer. The rest bend their heads. Perhaps they’re remembering other tragedies. The chant grows louder. More people join in, swaying back and forth, clapping to keep time. Though I [Rakhi] don’t understand the words, there’s something about this sharing of grief that comforts me. (Divakaruni, 265)

The gathering of people helps each of them to face the terrible reality of the day. The tradition of close contact with other people and their participation in common rituals reverberates in Umrigar's novel. A similar situation, though the tragedy is personal, not national, appears in Tehmina's life. After her husband's death, Tehmina spends a period of mourning. She observes with sad wonder that her American daughter-in-law lacks the understanding of how important such time is in the lives of the mourners. Tehmina ponders:

That's what's wrong with you Americans, you all think too much of laughter and play, as if life was a Walt Disney movie. [...] Even my Sorab was seduced by your Disney life—all this pursuit of happiness and pursuit of money and pursuit of this and that. But this year, I've learned a new lesson. Maybe the Indian way is better after all. See how much money you spend on therapists and grief counselors and all? [...] That's because your periods of mourning don't last as long as they need to. Why talk to a therapist [...], when you can talk to a grandfather or an aunt or uncle? (Umrigar, 8)

Both novels show the importance of family and community interaction, especially at times of distress. The closeness and intimacy of the participants help more than proclamations of national pride or a Prozac prescription.

Unfortunately, the purpose of the musicians' meeting in Rakhi's coffee shop is mistaken for something else. After the bulk of customers depart, the place is savagely attacked by a group of young men. Rakhi's ex-husband Sonny, who is present despite his warning advice earlier, tries to pacify them by offering them money from the cash register. One of the men retorts: "We're not thieves, shitface. We're patriots' " (Divakaruni, 266). And the reason for the attack is their ignorance and complete misinterpretation of the Indian tradition and culture: "We've been watching you and your terrorist pals. Celebrating, huh?' " (Divakaruni, 267). Jespal, Belle's boyfriend and coincidentally one of the few who came in traditional clothes, still tries to explain:

"We haven't done anything wrong. Those men in here – they were mourning. We're Americans, just the way you are. We all feel terrible about what happened." (Divakaruni, 267)

Jespal's attempt to cool down the furious atmosphere in the shop is in vain because he is unable to sway the racist opinions of the unthinking attackers:

“Looked in a mirror lately?” one of them spits. “You ain’t no American! It’s fuckers like you who planned this attack on the innocent people of this country. Time someone taught you faggots a lesson.” (Divakaruni, 267)

The attack is vicious. Jespal is badly cut and his eye is seriously hurt, Sonny and Rakhi’s father are beaten, Rakhi is almost choked. A miraculous appearance of a police car cruising in the neighbourhood saves them. The aggressors are never caught.

The tremendous change which occurred within the American society after 9/11 puts Rakhi and the others in a dangerous position. The Indian-Americans have lost their sense of belonging because they have been more or less excluded from the society as potentially menacing. Divakaruni includes a list of advice which some of the Indian organizations circulate by e-mail. Rakhi realises with growing anxiety that no part of her life is to remain untouched. Caution is required in even the most everyday aspects: the Indian-Americans should avoid going anywhere alone, should not wear native clothes, and should “put up American flags in prominent locations in homes and businesses” (Divakaruni, 274). Their lives have been changed, and they did not have a chance to do anything about it. Now they are supposed to give up parts of their identity and culture because a group of people from a faraway country committed an unspeakable act of violence.

The impact of the post-9/11 changes on the individual lives is hard to estimate.¹⁷ One result is clear, though. The identity has become a political issue. Rakhi observes:

I look at my reflection in the glass – the brown skin, the Indian features, the dark eyes with darker circles under them, the black crinkles of my hair. It’s familiar and yet, suddenly, alien.

You ain’t no American, one of the men had said.

He’s a racist idiot, I tell myself.

Is that so? My whisper voice gibes. *And how many others in this country would have agreed with him today?*

¹⁷ An attempt to examine the possible changes has been made by the Islamic Human Rights Commission (IHRC) based in London. It is a non-governmental organization in special consultative status with the Economic and Social Council of the United Nations. A questionnaire about the perceptions of the USA before and after 9/11 posted on the web page is part of the research in this area. It can be found in the appendix of the thesis.

But if I wasn't American, then what was I? (Divakaruni, 271)

The fundamental question of identity, so confusing for the second generation of Indian-Americans, is complicated further by their sudden sense of not belonging. They have become strangers in their own country overnight. Moreover, they are now cornered in the position where they are expected to be apologetic about who they are, as if they could somehow extenuate their Indianness and become more acceptable in the mainstream. It is a very sensitive issue burdened by other factors, which are completely out of reach of an individual. Global politics and world-wide war on terror are such gigantic enterprises with incessant media coverage that a single individual has only a miniature chance to shift the focus of others elsewhere. Fortunately, there are still the voices of Rakhi and other Indian-American characters who speak to large amounts of people, and who can help them realise the complexity of the issue.

7 Conclusion

The notion of identity and the process of construction and reconstruction of identity are important issues for the contemporary Indian-American community. The selected novels reveal a large set of aspects which are related to these issues.

Primarily, the construction of identity is influenced by the environment in which the process takes place. In this regard the position of Indian-American immigrants is complicated, and it is necessary to distinguish between the members of the first and the second generation, i.e. between parents and their children. Each generation creates the identity in a different environment: the parents are predominantly influenced by India, the children almost only by the US. Parents born in India settle down in the US only after making difficult choices and complicated arrangements. They are also well-aware of the dramatic changes that have occurred in their lives, and they are very conscious of cultural differences. On the contrary, their children do not have a direct experience with India. Their knowledge derives from the examples of their parents. Simultaneously, they are exposed to a culture which is strange for their parents but for them is the standard one. Therefore, many of the second generation Indian-Americans (such as Gogol or Rakhi) perceive themselves to be American by birth and not by assimilation.

Secondly, it is necessary to consider the position of the individual within the Indian-American community and the mainstream society. The first generation is usually more comfortable and feels more confident within their community. They confirm their identity and support each other in the traditional Indian way of life. On the other hand, the second generation Indian-Americans prefer the mainstream society because they are accustomed to it completely. They go to American schools, make American friends, and adopt the American culture and way of life. Their identity is a complex combination of the Indian heritage and American reality. Often, they tend to reject the Indian heritage because they do not feel its importance and formative value.

Thirdly, a different way of preserving the Indian heritage and values is to be expected from the first and second generation. The immigrants carry with them their languages, religions, rituals, customs, clothes, food, and names. It is obvious that

they will keep all these pieces of their original culture safe, and handle them with care and attention because they serve to strengthen their identity in the new environment. Loyalty to Indian roots and preservation of the Indian heritage are essential in the process of assimilation for the first generation of Indian immigrants. They feel the need to perpetuate certain stereotypes in order to protect their values, culture and community. Otherwise the Indian diaspora would lose its distinctiveness and diversity. On the other hand, members of the second generation are open to the influence of the mainstream culture and their opinions and attitudes change accordingly. They are confused by the expectations of the first generation and reject the stereotypes which hinder their assimilation and independent construction of identity. Still, some of the second generation characters realise the importance of the Indian heritage in the process of the construction of the identity—even though they do not cling to Indian traditions with such urgency as the first generation—and they often combine aspects of the Indian and American culture.

Ultimately, the process of the construction of identity is influenced by the majority society, which has its own set of stereotypes and schematised attitudes. They are often related to a simplified perception of the dichotomy of the West and the East when both regions are understood literally, not as artificial concepts. Also, the influence of the curatorial, exoticist and magisterial approaches on the image of India cannot be disregarded. The American majority often perceives the Indian-Americans as a homogeneous group and expects them to possess a determined set of attributes. At times, the lack of awareness and ignorance result in the emergence of prejudice. At the worst, Indian-Americans are rejected as a foreign and unwanted element in the mainstream society and subjected to racial attacks. Under these circumstances, the identity of the Indian-American characters threatens to shatter because a fundamental part of it is denied.

In conclusion, the notion of identity is related to various aspects, and their influence may range from beneficial to deeply upsetting. Differences in social status, age and education also affect the choices of the individual during the formation of his identity. Importantly, the process does not end in an exact moment, and as the examples from the novels have shown, it is possible to combine seemingly opposite elements and still create a firm structure.

České shrnutí

Cílem diplomové práce je nastínit proces formování identity indických přistěhovalců a Indo-Američanů žijících na území Spojených států. Koncept formování identity je ovlivňován několika faktory, které jsou v této práci popsány. Jedná se o rozdíl mezi první a druhou generací Indo-Američanů, o míru zachovávání a případného utužování stereotypů v indo-americké komunitě a současně o podíl americké většinové společnosti v procesu konstruování identity. Dopad stereotypního vnímání a z něj vyplývající reakce jsou také předmětem diskuze.

V současné době se indická menšina v rámci Spojených států amerických početně přibližuje dvěma milionům osob. Tvoří tak významný prvek v politickém a kulturním životě celé země a její vliv v těchto oblastech je zřetelný. Velmi patrný je také vliv Indo-Američanů v ekonomické sféře. Velkou měrou přispívají k rozvoji mnoha oborů, mezi něž neodmyslitelně patří oblast informačních technologií a počítačů obecně. Lze tedy očekávat, že indo-americká menšina bude hledat způsob, jak vyjádřit své zkušenosti se životem ve Spojených státech a jak popsat problémy, které ze vzájemného soužití plynou.

Porovnáním indického a amerického způsobu života, kultury a tradic je možné vymezit oblasti, ve kterých se nejčastěji objevuje napětí a konflikty. K tomuto účelu v této práci slouží tři současné romány indo-amerických autorek, které se úzce zabývají problematikou spojenou s životem indo-americké menšiny v americkém prostředí. Jedná se o román *The Namesake* autorky Jhumpy Lahiri, dále *Queen of Dreams* od Chitry Divakaruni a poslední z nich *If Today Be Sweet* od Thrity Umrigar. Společným prvkem všech tří děl je cesta jednotlivce k nalezení své identity a proces, během něhož se identita jako taková konstruuje. Románové postavy zahrnují celou škálu osob a umožňují tak nahlédnout do života různých generací, které se pohybují mezi indickým světem minulosti a Amerikou současnosti. Román Chitry Divakaruni se také soustředí na výrazné změny společenského a kulturního klimatu, ke kterým došlo v souvislosti s teroristickými útoky 11. září. K usnadnění orientace je děj každého románu krátce shrnut v úvodí části práce.

Kapitola nazvaná Západ a Východ se zabývá stereotypy, které přetrvávají v tradičním chápání světa a které tak ovlivňují veškeré debaty na toto téma. Orient bývá kladen do protikladu se západní civilizací a vychází z tohoto srovnání většinou

automaticky jako poražený. Amartya Sen rozdělil přístup Západu k Indii do tří různých kategorií, které přetrvávají dodnes. V historii pak ovlivnily nejen vnímání Evropanů či Američanů, ale měly vliv i na vnímání Indů sebe samých. První kategorie je nazvána curatorial, což lze volně přeložit jako postoj opatrovníka. Tento přístup se skutečně opatrovnicky projevoval. Patří sem veškeré snahy o téměř muzejní inventarizaci staroindické kultury. Indie je v tomto případě nazírána jako předmět hodný nejvyšší pozornosti pro svou zajímavost a zvláštnost. Druhý typ nahlížení na Indii lze pracovníčně nazvat honbou za exotikou (exoticism). Indie je v tomto případě vnímána jako země plná mystiky, tajuplných rituálů, a duchovna, zcela se vymykající racionálnímu chápání. Je zřejmé, že tento přístup vůbec nebere na vědomí veškeré úspěchy, kterých Indové dosáhli v matematice, astronomii a dalších exaktních vědách. Indie je uměle stylizována do role báje orientální země, kde svatí muži v mystickém vytržení meditují pod stromy a odhalují tajemství duchovního světa. Toto iluzorní pojetí je sice omezující, ale zdaleka ne tak škodlivé a nebezpečné jako třetí přístup nazvaný autoritativní (magisterial). Bílý kolonizátor jakožto vyslanec dokonalé a nadřazené západní civilizace přináší světlo, rozum a řád do chaosu, bezpráví a barbarství. S tím je pochopitelně spojené i naprosté přezírání indické kultury. Indie a její civilizace je považována za méněcennou a zcela podřadnou. Tento přístup pak také úzce souvisí s rasismem, jak dokazují Umrigar a především Divakaruni ve svých románech.

Stereotypní vnímání a uměle vytvořené kategorie nejsou ovšem problematické jen při chápání Indie a jejího historického, kulturního a politického významu. Podobně ovlivněný je i způsob, jakým je vnímán Západ. V žádném případě není možné považovat Západ za homogenní. Neplatí to ani v případě Spojených států amerických. Ačkoliv je v románech tato země popisována vesměs podobně, což může vést k vytvoření určitého stereotypního obrazu, je třeba mít na paměti, že skutečnost je v mnohem větší míře diferenciovaná. Současně je nutné si uvědomit, že jak na straně majoritní společnosti, tak na straně indo-americké menšiny přetrvávají v mnoha ohledech poměrně stereotypní názory.

Na straně indo-americké komunity se jedná především o vnímání Ameriky jako země, která skýtá neomezené možnosti a ve které je život automaticky pohodlnější a jednodušší. Je pravdou, že v mnoha případech tomu tak skutečně je. V porovnání s Indií, kde míra korupce dosahuje velice vysoké úrovně a tudíž negativně ovlivňuje každodenní život v mnoha směrech, představuje americké prostředí pro indické

přistěhovalce skutečně zemi zaslíbenou. Nicméně je pošetilé se domnívat, že život ve Spojených státech přináší Indo-Američanům jen samé pozitivní zkušenosti. Často jsou vnímáni jako cizí element, který je sice zajímavý a podněcuje zvědavost, ale ve skutečnosti není přijímán jako plnohodnotná součást americké mozaiky. Důvody, které k tomuto postoji vedou, mají své kořeny ve stereotypch udržovaných americkou většinovou společností. Mnohé jsou založeny na rasové nadřazenosti bílých Američanů, jiné pramení z dnes již překonaných představ o Indii jako chudé zemi třetího světa.

Spojené státy jsou zemí, která má s imigrací velmi bohaté zkušenosti. Na tomto místě není nutné široce popisovat počátek osidlování nových území a pozdější vznik Spojených států. Důležitější je povšimnout si toho, jak různorodá masa evropských přistěhovalců vytvořila svou novou společnou identitu. Přijetím sjednocující identity se vyhranili vůči Starému světu a započali proces formování vlastního národa a státu. Byl to proces, který pod označení „Američan“ sloučil jednotlivce z nejrůznějších společenských vrstev a kulturních zázemí, s odlišnými mateřskými jazyky, zvyky a tradicemi. Navzdory nepřeborné různorodosti se tyto lidé během relativně krátké doby sjednotili jako nový národ a začali sami sebe vnímat jako Američany. Ukázalo se ovšem, že rasově předpojatá společnost raných Spojených států z tohoto procesu vyloučila původní obyvatele a černošské otroky. Je tedy zřejmé, že pojem „Američané“ v žádném případě nepopisoval veškeré obyvatele na území Spojených států. Už od počátku byl tento koncept exkluzivní a byla z něj vyloučena rasově podřadná etnika, tedy přesněji etnika, která bílí Američané považovali za podřadná. Tento nešťastný historický odkaz do jisté míry ovlivňuje americké vnímání dodnes, jak je patrné i z několika situací v románech. Indo-Američané se setkávají s negativními reakcemi a v extrémním případě s násilím, které pramení z rasismu.

Jeden z pokusů, jak popsat či zachytit podstatu Ameriky, vedl k vytvoření termínu *melting pot* – tavící kotlík. Nejrůznější ingredience se v tomto kotlíku mísí do takové míry, že již nadále nejsou od sebe oddělitelné a vytváří tak zcela novou slitinu. Tento proces má ovšem tu nevýhodu, že se při něm původní individualita jednotlivých součástí vytrácí. Z tohoto důvodu je nyní dávána přednost termínu *mozaika*, někdy také *symfonie*. Výhoda je nasnadě – spojením různých prvků vzniká něco nového a současně jsou původní vlastnosti jednotlivých složek zachovány. Setkávání a interakce etnik, kultur a tradic v rámci Spojených států ideálně vede

k vzájemnému obohacování a zpestřování společného soužití, aniž vyžaduje přetvoření původní identity v „uměle americkou.“

Hrdinové románů se nacházejí v různých stádiích tohoto kulturního a společenského míšení. Pro všechny z nich platí, že tento proces je komplikovaný a přináší s sebou problematiku rozhodování a nelehké okamžiky. U hlavních hrdinů Gogola, Rakhi a Tehminy také platí, že musejí napřed zodpovědět základní otázku, kdo vlastně jsou, aby poté mohli nalézt místo, kam v mozaice patří.

V této souvislosti je nutné objasnit některé okolnosti, které hledání a konstruování identity provázejí. Románové postavy stojí na rozhraní dvou velmi odlišných světů. Indický svět patří v naprosté většině případů minulosti, americký svět přítomnosti a budoucnosti. Hrdinové často stojí před rozhodnutím, zda se vrátí do své domoviny, či zda zůstanou v Americe. Toto dilema je zejména tíživé pro Indo-Američany první generace, tedy narozené v Indii a nyní žijící ve Spojených státech. Pro ně je indická minulost aktuální, protože Indii stále vnímají jako svůj domov a i po letech strávených v nové zemi si v Americe nepřipadají doma. Příkladem takové postavy je Ashima Ganguli, Gogolova matka, která se na konci románu skutečně do Indie vrací. Indo-Američané druhé generace, tedy potomci imigrantů v Americe narození, s životem ve Spojených státech takové problémy jako první generace nemají. V Americe od malička vyrůstali a jinou zemi ve svém životě nepoznali. Plánují svůj život prožít tam, kde se narodili. Pro ně je Amerika jediná volba. Návrat do Indie by pro ně znamenal stejné vykořenění, jako cesta do Ameriky znamenala pro jejich rodiče.

Tato „generační propast“ jednoznačně ovlivňuje vnímání identity románových postav. Je nasnadě, že první generace se považuje ještě spíše za Indy a druhá už spíše za Američany. Míra amerikanizace je závislá na řadě faktorů. V románech je patrná jistá míra schematizace a stylizace, která provází témata asimilace a akulturace. Lze říci, že první generace si uchovává svébytnost (tedy svou indickou identitu) díky následujícím skutečnostem: zachovávají tradice a zvyky své původní kultury, hovoří mateřským jazykem a udržují kontakt s Indií a indickou komunitou v Americe. Tím se utvrzují ve své identitě, ale zároveň se částečně stávají stereotypem, který autorky využívají při kontrastování druhé generace.

Postoje druhé generace Indo-Američanů jsou rozmanitější. Hledají své místo a svou roli v americkém kontextu a zároveň se musejí potýkat s indickou minulostí, kterou udržují při životě jejich rodiče a kterou často chápou jako překážku. Gogol je

příkladem Indo-Američana, který vnímá sám sebe primárně jako Američana a svou identitu konstruuje nezávisle na svém původu. Je logické, že Gogol nemůže ze svého života vymístit svou rodinu, zázemí a bengálskou komunitu, která ho ovlivňuje i přes jeho odmítavý postoj. Snaží se tedy z tohoto prostředí odejít, aby mohl žít skutečně po svém. Svou identitu rekonstruuje, aby z ní odstranil indický nános, který vnímá jako umělý a vnucený. Některé aspekty indické kultury přijímá až ve chvíli, kdy k nim sám najde cestu. Gogol nakonec uznává význam kořenů, které ho poutají k jiné tradici, ale nepřiznává jim zásadní formativní význam. Vymyká se tak zcela světu svých rodičů (především matky), kteří o své identitě pevně zakotvené v indické tradici a kultuře nikdy nepochybovali.

Absence indické minulosti v americkém životě je klíčový prvek v procesu tvoření identity románové hrdinky Rakhi. Na rozdíl od Gogola, jehož rodiče udržují indické tradice, kulturu a jazyk v domácím prostředí i v rámci bengálské komunity, je Rakhi jakási tabula rasa. O Indii nemá žádné informace, rodina neudrhuje kontakty ani s příbuznými v Indii ani s indickými přáteli v Americe a její matka ji od všeho indického zrazuje. Jediný indický prvek v jejím životě je tradiční jídlo, které matka připravuje. Rakhi si o Indii vytvoří nereálné představy, které jsou v hojné míře ovlivněny exotizujícím postojem a tyto představy ovlivňují také její vnímání sebe samé. Teprve po přečtení matčiných deníků po její smrti se Rakhi dostává k přímým a autentickým informacím, které jí pomáhají pochopit, kdo skutečně je. Rakhi přijímá indické „dědictví“ jako součást své nově konstruované identity a velkou měrou tím obohacuje nejen sama sebe, ale i své okolí. Americká přítomnost se v jejím případě nenuceně spojuje s indickou minulostí, což pro Gogola představuje nefunkční kombinaci.

Tehmina je záměrně vystavěná jako postava, která narušuje stereotyp spojený s první generací imigrantů, protože do Ameriky přichází v pozdějším věku a má tam také rodinu. Jako postarší vdova, babička amerického vnuka, přijíždí do Spojených států za svým synem Sorabem a jeho americkou manželkou Susan. Tehmina však přesto stojí před klasickým rozhodnutím, zda se do Indie vrátí nebo ne. Její situace je komplikovaná právě tím, že její rodina je v Americe. Sorab totiž nedokáže pochopit, proč se chce Tehmina do Indie vracet. Ačkoliv on sám je také představitel první generace, přišel do Ameriky tak mladý, že Indii už nevnímá primárně jako svůj domov. Navíc se v Indii také nemá ke komu vracet, pokud Tehmina zůstane u něj a neodjede zpět. Proti sobě tedy stojí dva představitelé téže generace imigrantů

s naprosto odlišným vnímáním celé situace. Je zřejmé, že významnou roli v tomto konkrétním případě hraje věk obou postav a také jistá schematičnost, se kterou autorka situaci vykresluje. Nicméně Tehminino rozhodování není nijak snadné. V Americe je donucena přehodnotit od základu chápání sebe samé. Její identita je podrobena zkoušce, zda odolá tlaku americké společnosti, či zda si zachová svou integritu. Zůstává nakonec v Americe, ale nastavuje svá vlastní pravidla. Amerikanizace v jejím případě selhává v tom ohledu, že se Tehmina odmítá přizpůsobit automaticky a ve všem, ale je selektivní, přijímá jen to, co je v souladu s její plně zformovanou identitou, a při svém rozhodování zůstává aktivní.

Mozaika je tvořena také příslušníky majoritní společnosti, kteří v románech vystupují. V drtivé většině případů jsou ale Američané vykresleni stereotypně jako běloši anglosaského původu. Většinová společnost je schematicky vnímána jako homogenní skupina, která přistupuje k Indo-Američanům v menší či větší míře stereotypně. Především v románu Thrity Umrigar je toto zevšeobecnění dosti patrné. Na druhou stranu je třeba upozornit na to, že množství stereotypů v americkém vnímání stále přetrvává, jak dokládají Sen a Luce. Některé z těchto stereotypů jsou v románech zachyceny, čímž se zabývá 6. kapitola této práce.

Jedním z nejčastějších stereotypů, se kterým se setkávají románové postavy ale i lidé ve skutečném životě, je představa Indie jako chudé země třetího světa. Je nesporné, že životní úroveň v Indii a v Americe je rozdílná. Současně ale autorky dokazují, že ne vždy je nedostatek blahobytu problémem pouze indickým. Ashima Ganguli se po příchodu do Spojených států ocitá v prostředí, které se v porovnání s jejím zázemím v Indii jeví jako nuzné. Namísto služebnictva se nyní musí o veškerou domácnost postarat sama a navíc se potýká s nedostačující úrovní čistoty v americkém prostředí. Otázka čistoty se objevuje také v románu Thrity Umrigar. Tehmina, která naopak vnímá Spojené státy jako zemi posedlou čistotou a hygienou, se setkává se zanedbanými dětmi ze sousedství a je pro ni nepochopitelné, že jsou špinavé. Porovnává Spojené státy velmi radikálně s bombajskými slumy a vyvrací stereotypní vnímání Indie jako chudé a špinavé země.

Další oblastí, která je velmi často předmětem stereotypního nazírání ze strany americké (ale i evropské) společnosti, je indická kuchyně a zvyky spojené s přípravou jídel a stravováním. Ačkoliv se toto téma může jevit jako příliš praktické a přízemní, přesto se výrazně projevuje v románech Jhumpy Lahiri a Chitry Divakaruni. Zjednodušený pohled na Indii jako vegetariány, kteří především uctívají krávu jako

posvátné zvíře, je velmi nedostačující. Z románů je patrné, že indická kuchyně, příprava jídel a zvyklosti s ní spojené jsou jedním z nejnápadnějších prvků, které ovlivňují formování identity a proces sebeurčení jednotlivých postav. Kuchyně se stává místem, kde se rekonstruuje spojení s indickým odkazem a kulturními kořeny. Zejména oslavy doprovázené tradičním pohoštěním pak utvrzují pocit sounáležitosti indo-americké komunity.

Americká většinová společnost udržuje mnohé stereotypy v platnosti pouze z neznalosti nebo nedostatku informací. Bohužel někdy dochází k tomu, že tato neznalost a neobeznámenost s indickou kulturou a jejími tradicemi vede k ignorování a přehlížení zásadních aspektů, které jsou ovšem pro Indo-Američany mnohdy zcela zásadní. Tento plošně odmítavý postoj je ilustrován na vybraných příkladech z románů. Týká se především oblastí života, které zůstávají většinové společnosti do určité míry skryté a tudíž je nesnadné se s nimi seznámit. Nicméně fakt, že je něco neznámé a nepochopené ještě nemůže vést k rozhodnutí, že tyto rysy indické kultury bude americká většina nerespektovat a jejich platnost zpochybňovat. Z románů ovšem vyplývá, že k tomu bohužel dochází poměrně často. Americká společnost se také málokdy zamýšlí nad tím, zda tímto přístupem Indo-Američany nepoškozují. Ve většině případů uvedených v románech se negativní dopad nijak zásadně neprojevuje a Indo-Američané vzniklou situaci vyřeší v souladu se svými tradicemi. Pokud ustoupí americké neznalosti a zachovají se podle očekávání většiny, chápou to jako součást asimilačního procesu.

Existují ovšem stereotypy, které jsou nebezpečné a které přijmout nelze. Jedním z nich je rasisticky zabarvený náhled na indo-americkou menšinu. Zejména patrný je v románu Chitry Divakaruni, která popisuje situaci ve Spojených státech po teroristických útocích z 11. září. Kombinace rasismu a hysterie vede k agresivnímu napadení Rakhi a jejích přátel jen na základě toho, že jinak vypadají a jinak se oblékají. Indo-Američané druhé generace, kteří sami sebe vnímají jako plnohodnotné Američany, jsou konfrontováni se skutečností, že část většinové společnosti je považuje za hrozbu a jako Američany je rozhodně nepřijímá. Pocit vykořenění je v takovém případě doprovázen zmatkem a naprostou bezmocí. Rakhi nezná jiný domov než Ameriku, která je jí teď ale odpírána ze zcela absurdních důvodů. Rasismus se jeví jako nejvážnější problém, se kterým se indo-americké postavy v románech setkávají. Současně je to problém, jehož řešení tato menšina není

schopna ovlivnit právě proto, že rasismus je zakotven ve stereotypu, který musí rozrušit sami Američané.

Závěrem lze říci, že výsledek komplikovaného procesu formování identity je závislý na mnoha faktorech, které jsou v diplomové práci popsány a začleněny do širší diskuze. Práce je zaměřena na praktické aspekty a problémy, které doprovázejí proces formování identity první a druhé generace Indo-Američanů v současných Spojených státech. Zároveň si tato práce neklade za cíl být vyčerpávajícím zdrojem informací k tématu indo-americké menšiny, jejího sebeurčení a asimilace. Zvolená primární literatura pokrývá jen část indo-americké komunity a je pochopitelné, že nemůže obsáhnout veškeré trendy a aktuální vývoj. Pro širší studium tématu konstrukce indické identity v rámci odlišného kulturního a společenského prostředí může tato diplomová práce sloužit jako úvod a odrazový můstek.

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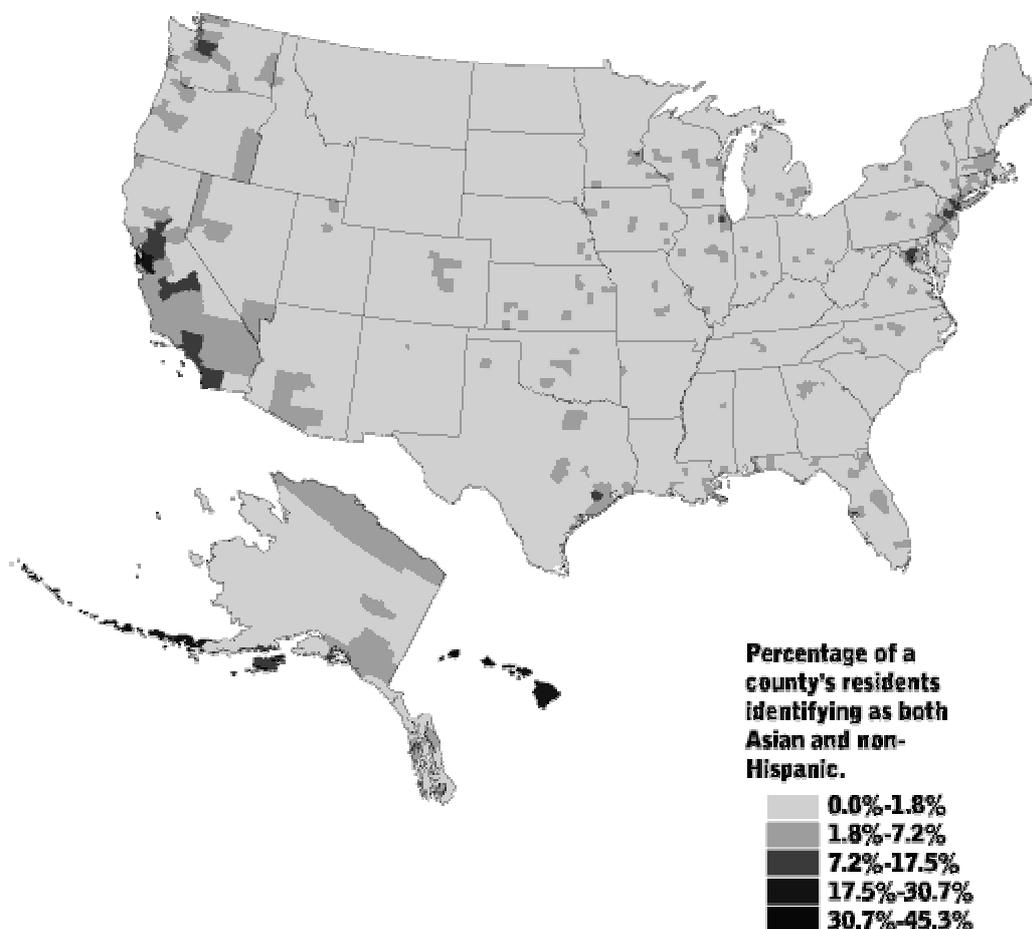
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Appendix

- Asian population in the United States (map)
- IHRC survey: Perceptions of non-Americans about America and its Policies before and after 9/11: Ideas of Peace and Conflict

Asian population in the United States



For Census purposes, the racial category Asian includes Asian Indians, Chinese, Filipino, Japanese, Korean, Vietnamese, and a number of other Asian ethnicities. In 2000, all these groups together accounted for 3.6 percent of the total U.S. population, up from 2.8 percent in 1990.

Source:

Census 2000, Social Science Data Analysis Network, 9 Apr. 2008

<http://www.censuscope.org/us/map_nhasian.html>.

Survey: Perceptions of non-Americans about America and its Policies before and after 9/11: Ideas of Peace and Conflict.

This project is run by Dr. Saied Reza Ameli and will form part of a paper on the subject.

The United States policy after September 11, 2001 in relation to non-Americans in general and Muslims in particular, seems to have resulted in a 'new perception' about the United States of America. This questionnaire is an attempt to understand the current feelings of non-Americans about 'America'.

You do not have to give your name, but it would be useful if we could use your first name when writing our report. Please give your first name only if you do not mind it being quoted:

Age:

Male:

Female:

Occupation:

Nationality:

Country of Residence:

Religion:

Education: Undergraduate Graduate Postgraduate

Field of study:

1. How did you feel about the United States, before 9/11?
2. What is your feeling about the United States today, after 9/11?
3. What words come first to your mind in relation to America? (Please don't write more than three words).
4. Do you think 'Xenophobia' after 9/11 has resurfaced again?

- 5.. Do you believe there is a distinction between different layers of the USA e.g. American Politics, American People, American Elites etc.? or is America simply America without any difference?
6. Are you hopeful about future of the World?
7. Do you fear about the future of the World?
8. Do you see world society more united or more fragmented today? What is the main reason?
9. What in your opinion would be the key solution to achieve 'global peace' in world society?
10. Is there any 'great collective identity' that can bring together all peoples of the World?
11. Who or what do you consider to be the main obstacle for an environment of global peace?

Source:

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