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Table of Contents

1	Introduction.....	4
2	Migration.....	6
2.1	Reasons for Migration	6
2.2	Forms of Migration.....	7
2.3	Concepts of Integration.....	8
2.3.1	Assimilation/absorption	8
2.3.2	Cultural pluralism/ethnic pluralism.....	10
2.3.3	Transnationalism	11
2.4	Conclusion	14
3	Identity	16
3.1	Concepts of identity	16
3.1.1	The nation as source of identification.....	16
3.1.2	Ethnic origin and culture as source of identification.....	18
3.1.3	From hybridity to third space.....	19
3.1.4	Transcultural identities in transnational spaces.....	21
3.1.5	Diaspora.....	22
3.1.6	Conclusion	23
3.2	Psychosocial consequences of migration.....	24
3.2.1	Loss of speech community	25
3.2.2	Loss of social interaction fields.....	25
3.2.3	Loss of occupation	26
3.2.4	Loss of home.....	27
3.2.5	Benefits of a new beginning.....	28
3.2.6	Conclusion	29
4	Immigrant Fiction	30
4.1	What is “immigrant fiction”?.....	30
4.1.1	Developments in American immigrant fiction	30
4.1.2	Scholarly and public recognition	31
4.1.3	Categorisation	33
4.2	Migrant writers.....	34
4.2.1	Generation.....	34
4.2.2	Autobiography and authenticity	35

4.3	The characteristics of New Immigrant Fiction.....	37
4.3.1	Characteristic themes and motives	38
4.3.2	Characteristic formal and stylistic features.....	39
4.4	Conclusion	40
5	Premise for the analysis of the selected novels.....	41
5.1	Aspects of identity.....	41
5.2	Introduction of the novels.....	43
5.2.1	Dreaming in Cuban (1992) by Cristina García	43
5.2.2	Monkey Bridge (1997) by Lan Cao.....	44
5.2.3	The Namesake (2003) by Jhumpa Lahiri.....	45
6	Analysis.....	46
6.1	Name	46
6.1.1	Customs of addressing people	46
6.1.2	Names and their meanings.....	48
6.1.3	The name and the self	50
6.2	Occupation/education/special skills	53
6.2.1	Occupation or hobbies as self-realisations or therapy.....	53
6.2.2	Education and occupation as vehicle for social or personal opportunity	59
6.3	Relationships	61
6.3.1	Inherited generational conflict.....	62
6.3.2	Reversal of parents' and children's roles	66
6.3.3	Old world parents and new world children.....	70
6.4	Body.....	75
6.4.1	Physical characteristics as imprints of identity	76
6.4.2	Dressing up	78
6.4.3	Disease.....	79
6.4.4	Eating disorders.....	80
6.5	Psyche.....	83
6.5.1	Trauma.....	84
6.5.2	Loss/ grief/ solitude.....	94
6.5.3	Homesickness/ nostalgia	100
6.6	Language	104
6.6.1	Cultural implications of language.....	104
6.6.2	Language as power.....	109

6.6.3	Recording history.....	111
6.7	Belief.....	114
6.7.1	Provides purpose and explanation.....	114
6.7.2	Gives guidance and provides structure.....	116
6.7.3	Predicts the future and gives hope	119
6.7.4	Provides protection and healing	120
6.8	Home and belonging	122
6.8.1	Immigrant community.....	123
6.8.2	Return to the (paternal) home country.....	126
6.8.3	Relationship to the country of residence	128
7	Conclusion	133
8	Bibliography.....	135
8.1	Primary sources	135
8.2	Secondary sources.....	135
8.3	Online sources	139
8.4	Interviews	140
9	Index	141
10	Abstract	142
11	Curriculum Vitae.....	143

1 Introduction

The topic of this thesis presupposes that there is a special relevance of identity in the context of immigration. Indeed, immigrants or so-called “trans-cultural” people often face more complex journeys of arriving at their identity than those who are confronted with the unambiguity of a singular cultural heritage. Salman Rushdie suggests substituting the classical image of the *mirror* in which a person discovers his/her identity with that of a “broken mirror” (Newton 3). Instead of clear contours, the immigrants only see pieces of themselves in the mirror. Everything that lies behind them is fragmented. What is reflected in the mirror does not assume a fully integrated and even picture. For an immigrant, the past not only reflects back on the present, it is also shattered and not fully represented in their consciousness.

On the basis of three novels, the way immigrant authors convey the conflicts posed by the paradox situation of belonging to two different cultures at the same time, will be analysed in this thesis. The selection of the novels tries to capture the variety of immigrant experiences in order to allow general statements about them. They all feature different types of immigration and characters from different home countries. However, to make a comparison feasible, all novels share the same setting: post-war, urban USA.

Cristina García’s *Dreaming in Cuban* deals with a Cuban family that – over political disagreement – is split geographically between Cuba and the US. *Monkey Bridge*, Lan Cao’s debut novel, deals with a mother and daughter who escape the war in their home country Vietnam and seek refuge in the US. In the third novel, *The Namesake* by Jhumpa Lahiri, an Indian couple embarks on the adventure of starting a new life in the US with the prospect of a better life.

Although the intention is not to read the novels of immigrant authors as social documents that represent historically or biographically accurate events, it is worthwhile to include some of the sociological theory on migration into this study. The thesis, therefore, starts off with three sections that cover theoretical considerations on the topics of migration, identity and the genre of immigrant fiction, before turning to the actual analysis of the selected novels.

The novels are not only perceived as finished pieces of art serving a self-sufficient purpose, but also as result of a working process. In this process, the writers put not only creativity but

also parts of their own stories into the stories by using a variety of literary strategies. Therefore, also a reflection on form will be included in the analysis of the novels.

Since in the case of immigrant fiction, the authors are most of the time bearer of similar life-stories as the protagonists of their books, in this genre a certain degree of interdependence between the identity of the author and their characters is very likely. However, it is not the aim of this thesis to make assumption of the amount of auto-biographical truth in the novels. In this thesis, the novels are strictly treated as fiction, as this is what their authors intended them to be.

2 Migration

Human migration is a crucial part of the cultural history of mankind. Migration is a phenomenon that has been present at all times. Its forms and characteristics, however, have changed throughout history, shaped by the social, economic and cultural realities of different times and places. Given the diversity and heterogeneity of the phenomena that are labelled “migration”, this first section of the thesis tries to specify certain terms that are important as a premise for the discussion of the selected works of fiction.

The theory is based on an interdisciplinary approach that covers sociology, history, anthropology and cultural studies. Since the novels that have been selected for the thesis are set in the 20th century and deal with American immigration, this time period and region will be focused on primarily.

2.1 Reasons for Migration

Due to the fact that migration is the result of interrelated cultural, political, economic, demographic, ecological, ethnic, religious, and social factors, it hardly ever can be explained mono-causally. Although, traditionally, there is a separation of voluntary and involuntary forms of migration, the complex combinations of reasons that lead to migration, do not allow a strict division. It is more accurate to speak of a number of *pull*- and *push*-factors (Han 2009, 12), that influence migration flows. Classical examples of pull-factors are political stability, religious freedom, economic prosperity and better educational opportunities of the in-taking country. Frequent push-factors are war, political or religious persecution, natural catastrophes, poverty, or lack of occupational prospects.

In the late 20th century, the assumption was made that there was a migration system, made up by the numerous linkages between two (or more) territories. According to this approach, migration is a social product of the interplay of demographic, socio-cultural, historical, economic and political factors and not a result of individual decisions (Han 2009, 20). Reasons for migration, however, do include the personal motivation of individuals and are not solely determined by objective external factors. Thus, the decision to migrate is not always a decision based on logical, rationally considered advantages, but often connected to emotional and social needs.

2.2 Forms of Migration

In sociological terms, “migration” is defined as the spatial movement of a person or a group of persons, ending in a permanent change of residence (Han 2009, 6). If the movement involves the transgression of national borders, it is a form of international migration. This thesis, specifically and exclusively, deals with international migration.

A specific type of migration is chain migration, which refers to the migration of people who follow their previously emigrated family members or other people of their social community. Follower immigrants often face easier conditions than the pioneer immigrants because they benefit from the social network that has already been established by the previous migrants. Chain migrants usually are provided with advice on transportation, have a place where they can stay and the prospect of finding employment very quickly after their arrival in the new country (MacDonald and MacDonald 227).

In many cases, chain migration is *delayed family migration* where the “breadwinner” first leaves the country for work. Once being able to provide for his family’s livelihood, he sends for the rest of them. Thus, chain immigration not only supports the development of social networks between people of the same origin in the receiving country, but also the reunion of families (Han 2009, 10/1).

A development that had a crucial impact on immigration was the beginning of the era of computer technology in the 1980s. The increased availability of information technologies and social media has facilitated ways of communication between migrants and their home communities. Migrants were able to establish stronger connections between their social field at home and in the new country. Moreover, the possibility to build interpersonal relationships beyond place and time gave way for the development of very strong and dense migration networks within the receiving countries (Han 2009, 14/5).

Migration is not limited to people of a specific social class. Against the common cliché of the poor immigrant trying to make it in the new country, a considerable proportion of immigrants come from high- and middle-income classes. Statistics show an increasing percentage of scientists and specialists of numerous professional fields (doctors, nurses, engineers, technicians, architects etc.) among the emigrants to the United States ever since the 1960s. While these highly educated immigrants used to primarily come from European countries, the new immigrants came from countries of the developing world. Between 1961 and 1980, more

than 500 000 scientists and professional workers migrated from the developing countries to the USA (Han 2009, 29).

This development was also promoted by US-migration law that prefers professionals and academics over non-educated people. While the USA, as one of the receiving countries of immigration, profits from this immense manpower-input, in the emigration countries, *brain drain* causes a serious lack of professional work force (Han 2009, 28). In a number of countries, the constraint of brain drain became a major concern of migration policies.

2.3 Concepts of Integration

One of the dominant topics in the research of migration was – and still is- the question of how immigrants are incorporated into society. Migration research as a scientific discipline emerged in the late 19th century in the USA and Britain. Since these are, foremost, migrant in-taking countries, research questions primarily were posed from their perspective, rather than from the perspective of the immigrants themselves (Han 2005, 8).

2.3.1 Assimilation/absorption

In the beginning, the ways how immigrants were supposed to integrate into society was believed to follow a linear progression that was regulated by some kind of natural laws. The first relevant scientific publication in the field of migration research by Ernest G. Ravenstein was titled *The Laws of Migration* and appeared in 1885 in the Journal of the Royal Statistical society (Han 2009, 37). In the following decades, numerous circular and sequential models of the immigrant's assimilation process appeared on the scientific stage.

A model of the *migration process* developed by Shmuel N. Eisenstadt in the early 1950s subdivides migration into three phases. The process of building the motivation to migrate constitutes the first phase. The second phase is the course of moving. It lasts from leaving the original country to settlement in the receiving country, which at this point, usually, is completely unknown to the migrant. Also part of this phase is the experience of desocialisation as a result of the radical change of the socio-cultural environment. With the arrival in the new country, the knowledge of social behaviour and rules owned by the migrants instantly loses its validity. The immediate consequences of this unsettling experience are disorientation, loss of structure and existential fear. The third phase is more or less open-ended. It is the beginning of a long-lasting, sometimes generation-spanning learning process

of the social conventions in the receiving country. This phase is referred to as *assimilation* in the earlier works by Eisenstadt. Later, however, he used the term “process of *absorption*” (Han 2005, 45-61; Han 2009, 43-46).

The process of absorption, according to Eisenstadt, exists of the “institutionalisation of role-expectation and behaviour” on the one hand, and the “integral personal adjustment” on the other hand, which finally leads to the “dispersion” of the immigrant (Han 2009, 46). Dispersion is reached when the immigrant loses his/her own ethnic group existence and group identity.

A further analytic model of the process of assimilation was established by Milton M. Gordon, the author of *Assimilation in American Life* published in 1964. In this model, the process of assimilation is divided into seven separate stages (Gordon 71). In the beginning stage, the immigrants experience *cultural assimilation* in which they learn the language and the behavioural rules of the receiving country to master the challenges of everyday life in the foreign country. This part of assimilation is only directed at the outside world and focuses on purposefulness. Every immigrant, without exception, undergoes this stage. Having accomplished cultural assimilation, the immigrants still are separated from the core society, and are still confronted with prejudice, exclusion and economic inequality.

The second stage of Gordon’s model represents *structural assimilation* which is not undergone by all immigrants. At this second stage, the immigrant succeeds to gradually access the core society on a social level. Structural assimilation is completed with a “large-scale entrance into institutions, clubs and cliques of the host society” (Gordon 71). It is the precondition for the following stages that do not follow a sequence and are not dependent on one another.

One of these stages is *marital assimilation* that takes place on the basis of interracial marriages between members of the immigrants and the host communities. Another stage is *identificational assimilation* where the immigrant develops “a sense of peoplehood based exclusively on the host society” (Gordon 71) and becomes part of the “in-group”. The further stages are *attitude receptional assimilation*, *behavioural receptional assimilation* and *civic assimilation*. These stages describe the attitude of the core society towards the immigrants and are accomplished, if prejudice, discrimination and power conflicts are overcome (Gordon 71).

Gordon's approach is more advanced than many others, because it does not assume that the stages – at least stage three to seven – do not follow a specific order. They can be parallel, or absent at all. Moreover, Gordon does not support the principle of most other theories that assimilation necessarily ends in the complete absorption into the core society.

In the late 1960s, finally, there was a shift of paradigm in migration research, withdrawing from the idea that migration was following strict, almost natural laws. Instead, it was claimed that assimilation was characterised by discontinuity and regression and did not follow a strictly progressive pattern. The hitherto existing models failed to explain the phenomenon of uneven assimilation. A further point of criticism concerned the endpoint of assimilation, which earlier research defined to be the immigrants' complete adaptation to the in-taking culture. This approach was replaced by ideas that favoured *cultural pluralism* (Han 2009, 42).

2.3.2 Cultural pluralism/ethnic pluralism

Cultural pluralism was first propagated by American sociologist Horace Kallen in the essay *Democracy Versus the Melting Pot* in 1915 (Han 2005, 103). Kallen proposed that the union of the various cultures in the USA does not have to lead to dissolution of diversity of cultures into a homogenous mass. He further claims that sustained difference could turn into a democratic co-existence of cultures. He heavily criticised the on-going assimilation efforts of politics and society and the Americanisation cultures.

Its [democratic commonwealth] form is that of the federal republic; its substance a democracy of nationalities, cooperating voluntarily and autonomously in the enterprise of self-realization through the perfection of men according to their kind. The common language of the commonwealth, the language of its great political tradition, is English, but each nationality expresses its emotional and voluntary life in its own language, in its own inevitable aesthetic and intellectual forms. The common life of the commonwealth is politico-economic, and serves as the foundation and background for the realization of the distinctive individuality of each nation that composes it. (Kallen)

In the early 1960s, this approach was taken over by Nathan Glazer and Daniel P. Moynihan and transformed into a theory of *ethnic pluralism*. In *Beyond the Melting Pot*, published in 1963 (Han 2005, 65), they argue against the maintaining pursuit of America's minorities to level up with the prominent WASP culture. They celebrate the differences between different ethnicities and call for a revival and conservation of the distinct ethnic identities. Despite the urge to assimilate to the majority culture, they argue, a homogenous American ethnicity is a myth: "The 'American' in abstract does not exist" (Glazer and Moynihan 13/4).

The ideology of ethnic pluralism was connected to the *ethnic revival movement*, a social reaction to the Civil rights Movement in the USA. In opposition to the Civil Rights Movement's goal to achieve a complete equality of black and white people, more radical groups, like Black Power or Black Panther propagated Pan-Africanism and embraced the differences imposed by ethnic heritage. Soon, other ethnic minorities also started to pronounce their differences and celebrated their particular culture, symbols, music, folklore and literature (Han 2005, 62).

Stephen Steinberg is a critic of the ethnic pluralist credo. For Steinberg, the "ethnic fever" of the 60s was a symptom of an actual decline of ethnic cultures in the USA. He argues that, in fact, the existence of original ethnic cultures in the USA was nothing more than a myth. In reality, most of the ethnic specificities had "drowned" in the political, economic and cultural American mainstream (Han 2005, 87-105). Also other theorists moved away from an essentialist understanding of culture.

This shift away from essentialist towards constructionist approaches was part of a wider development in the field of social science. The so-called *cultural turn* and the wake of postmodernism profoundly influenced the ideas of assimilation and integration of migrants. The new interest of migration studies focused on questions of group identification, socialisation, role expectations, psychological assimilation, and community relations of immigrants (Han 2009, 43).

2.3.3 Transnationalism

A later paradigm shift in migration studies was marked by the so-called *transnational turn*. The discussion of transnationalism was initiated by some of the works in the field of social anthropology in the early 1990s. Especially influential were those by Eugenia Georges, and Sherri Grasmuck and Patricia R. Pessar who focussed their research on Dominican transnational communities (Vertovec 2009, 13; Levitt and Glick Schiller 183).

Transnationalism is built on the assumption that nations are not territorially bound but can transcend spatial borders. The idea of transnationalism developed in a time of rapid progress in the field of digital technology. Whereas the means of travelling had become affordable and convenient already in the previous decades, now also telecommunication advanced significantly. The growing popularity and reduced costs of information and communication technologies such as the internet and social media contributed to the high degree of mobility

of our civilisation (Vertovec 2009, 12). As a consequence of the constantly progressing vertical and horizontal expansion of globalisation, the importance of “space and territorial borders” has reduced considerably in the previous decades (Han 2009, 66/7; Spiro 4/5, 22). This development crucially changed the face of immigration.

Whereas earlier migration was considered to be one-directional, globalisation created a new type of migrants that move back and forth between their two homes. These *circulating migrants* (Han 2009, 61) remain in contact with their native countries through multi-stranded social relations. In this sense, also phone calls and Skype sessions can, metaphorically, be seen as temporary movement to the home community. Affective relationships can be developed, or remained also in non-territorial, transnational places.

In contrast to older forms of immigration, traditional concepts of assimilation and absorption do not apply to this new type of immigration. It is possible for immigrants to stay a part of the communities back in their native countries without the constraint of physical presence. Hence, there is no need for them to dissolve in the mainstream culture and cut all ties to their previous lives. Peter Spiro states that the new immigrants have insinuated themselves into American space “in a way that assimilationists’ predecessors did not. In both directions, the territory of America – in this sense of human community – no longer so clearly coincides with its physical borders” (4/5). He continues:

In the face of globalisation [...] assimilation assumptions seem less powerful. Increasing global mobility and the sustainability of important ties are rendering place of birth an attenuated marker of life trajectory. A child born in America may well leave America in childhood, or she may grow up with a primary attachment to some other community. The fact of birthplace becomes a happenstance, and a person sharing birthplace in the United States may in fact share little else. (Spiro 10)

Transnationality, to a great extent, has been catalysed by advancements in technology and transportation, and an increasing globalisation of the economy. Nevertheless, also political and social factors play a role in the development of a transnational immigrant community. On the one hand, the degree of transnationalisation depends on the conditions that immigrants find in the host country and the policy of their home country, on the other hand. If the host country’s population is hostile towards foreigners, the newcomers are more likely to stay among themselves and stain their ties to the homeland. Thus, the tendency of xenophobia and discrimination in typical, high-income in-taking countries and a segregated society contribute to the development of transnational communities.

Furthermore, political measures are undertaken by the sending countries to encourage its emigrated citizens to perpetuate their relationship to the motherland (Glick Schiller 50). The right of dual citizenship – granted in about 50 % of the world's countries – for example, makes it possible for immigrants to vote in their home country. Consequently, it is a common practice of political parties to establish offices abroad to canvass for emigrates. In addition to voting rights, expatriates retain access to health care, welfare benefits and property rights (Han 2009, 61-67; Vertovec 2009, 11).

Another, not insignificant, economic avail for the emigration countries are the relatively small, but regularly transferred, amounts of remittances. Additionally to their function as financial necessity for the families who receive them, remittances represent a quick and secure source of foreign exchange (Vertovec 2009, 8). Data from statistics of the World Bank show a massive increase in the inflow of remittances worldwide from approximately \$ 51,9 billion in 1995 to \$ 287,9 billion in 2005. In 2011, the total inflow of remittances accounted for \$ 513,3 billion (see World Bank Annual Remittances Data). Over 60 % of the total remittances are received by developing countries (Levitt and Glick Schiller 146). The sum received in form of remittances is about three times higher than the inflow of financial development aid. Indeed, numerous economies depend heavily on the money sent home by their (ex-)nationals. In countries like Tajikistan and Liberia, remittances represent as much as 46,9 % and 31 % of the countries' GDP (see World Bank Annual Remittances Data).

Transnationalism manifests itself also in the social setting of the family. So-called *transnational families* (Levitt and Glick Schiller 195-197; Han 2009, 62-64; Vertovec 2009, 61-64) are characterised by multiple home bases and multiple national loyalties. Belonging to a geographically dispersed family is a common reality for migrants. Frequent examples are families where one parent – predominantly the father – emigrates in order to find work and be able to care financially for those left behind. In other cases, it is the children who are the ones who leave the family. For Chinese and Korean parents sending, for example, sending their children off to schools in the USA has become fairly common. They hope that their children, eventually, will gain admission to prestigious universities. Quite tellingly, they are referred to as parachute kids (Vertovec 2009, 62). The resulting long-distance parenting enforces a transnational relationship between parents and children.

Not only first-generation-immigrants are included into transnational networks. Also their children may be socialised in a particular cultural context and brought up in a household

where they are presented with values, goods, people and stories from the ancestral country. Through the exposure to their parental culture, they may, automatically, develop a transnational mind-set. While some researchers predict that transnational ties will weaken among second-generation immigrants, others argue that, even though they might not be central to their lives and less intensive than those of their parents, transnational elements will not vanish completely.

The engagement with their parents' culture will rise and fall at different points of their life-cycles. The same people who show little interest for their ethnic roots may reactivate the connection to their homeland at certain points of their lives, for example, marriage or pregnancy. It is not uncommon that second – or later – generations of immigrants try to raise their children in a way that they are aware of their families' cultural heritage. They do so by celebrating traditional festivities and teaching their children the particular values of their ancestral culture (Levitt and Glick Schiller 196/7). Specific examples are given in the article by Peggy Levitt and Nina Glick Schiller (197), reporting of “children of Gujaratis who go back to India to find marriage partners, the second generation Pakistanis who begin to study Islam [...] when they have children, or the Chinese American business school students who specialize in Asian banking”. Levitt and Glick Schiller conclude their argument by pointing out that

[f]or these individuals, the generational experience is not territorially bounded. It is based on actual and imagined experiences that are shared across borders regardless of where someone was born or now lives. Locating migrants and their family squarely within transnational social fields requires rethinking the notion of generation and the term second generation. (196)

2.4 Conclusion

Migration comprises innumerable different experiences made at different places in different historical and political periods. It is, therefore, not possible to capture all its forms and particularities. Rather than attempting a comprehensive description of the scientific findings in the field of migration research, this chapter intends to provide a survey of its broad theoretical arrays.

For further enterprise, the transnational approach will be most appropriate, since the thesis is concerned with contemporary forms of migration. However, also parts of the assimilationists' and pluralists' insights are crucial when it comes to explain migrants' identity formation processes.

3 Identity

Identities are unstable and fluent. They underlie a rotation of constant making and unmaking. The formation process of identities is influenced by the individual character traits and history of a person on the one hand, as well as by its position in the social environment, on the other hand. All developments around and within a person afflict the constitution of his/her identity. People who share similar life altering experiences might also share some parts of their identity. In the following part of this thesis, the specificity and similarity of migration identities will be observed. To do so, first, it is necessary to elaborate on a variety of theories that are concerned with the formation and development of individual and collective identities. Second, the impact of the migration experience on identity will be dealt with.

3.1 Concepts of identity

One of the constitutional elements of identity is the place where we feel that we belong. *Place*, in this context, however, is not necessarily a spatial category but rather a virtual one. The places that people feel they belong to, can take different forms that may or may not be anchored in geographical spaces. Especially, in the case of migration, simplifications of matters of belonging are dismantled and fail to provide explanations of the enormous variety of identity constructions. Theorists from different fields have discovered that people identify with all kinds of places, groups, institutions, value systems or ideologies. This chapter presents some of the concepts that can serve as sources of identities for immigrants.

3.1.1 The nation as source of identification

Nations can be objects of intense personal attachments. People are ready to sacrifice a lot for their nation; some are even prepared to fight wars in their names. What is it that makes the nation such a strong unifying bond?

Nations provide a collective, around which “people can build their identities and those of others” (Baldwin et al. 158). In pre-modern times, before nation states were invented, people used to identify themselves more with local social groups, such as the tribe or family. Historical developments, such as the rise of capitalism, globalisation, and new dynastic forms lead the world into the era of modernism. Nation states were born and with them the

nationalist spirit. The nation was stylised as the true source of identification to which people owe their loyalty and obedience (Baldwin et al. 158).

The great appeal of the nation is its provision of security. The members of a nation are connected by a(n imagined) shared history and the same roots. Anthony Smith (1996, 106/7) defines the nation as an “ideal type” that describes “a named community of history and culture, possessing a unified territory, economy, mass education system and common legal rights” (qtd. in Mitchell 269). He, furthermore, states that “nations must have a measure of common culture and civic ideology, a set of common understandings and aspirations, sentiments and ideas that bind the population together in their homeland” (Smith 1999, 11). The bond of the nation defeats any differences – including those of class, gender and age – that may cause a division of its members.

It is this idealisation and generalisation that makes the nation an *imagined community* (see Anderson, 1991). In reality, of course, the people forming the nation are too many as to allow them to know one another personally. Benedict Anderson unveils the myths of the national community and claims the nation to be nothing more than the natural result of “a people or folk” (Mitchell 269) that is related by blood and native to a particular place.

The fact that the nation is an invention and only exists in people’s minds, nevertheless, does not change the fact that the actions on its behalf are real. On the contrary, defending national sovereignty has served as legitimation for a number of political decisions in the past and will continue to do so (Anderson 159). Thus, even though individuals might not use the nation as their source of identification, they are still confronted with the nationalism by other people or the state that may interfere with their personal freedom.

Additionally to the ideological concept of nationhood, where membership is based on “blood ties linking residents around the world to their respective homelands” (Levitt and Glick Schiller 199), there is also a legal definition of national identity. The criterion to legally belong to a nation is the gratification of *citizenship*. In states like Haiti that do not grant dual citizenships, the national borders delimit the possibility for immigrants to remain part of their former nations. However, people within the territory of the nation see their emigrants and maybe also their offspring as members of their nation, regardless of their legal citizenship (Levitt and Glick Schiller 200).

3.1.2 Ethnic origin and culture as source of identification

According to Sian Jones (1997, xiii), ethnic identity is defined as “that aspect of a person’s self-conceptualization which results from identification with a broader group in opposition to others on the basis of perceived cultural differentiation and/or common decent” (qtd. in Baumann 12). Ethnic groups are constructed by perceived cultural differences setting one group apart from another. An identity model that equals identity with its difference, is “focusing less on identity as *being* (a stable, self-contained agent) and more on *becoming* (on processes of constructing, negotiation and, not least, maintaining) [emphasis added]” (Kunow and Raussert 7/8).

However, there are also essentialist approaches to ethnicity. Social anthropologist Robert Geertz cited in Baumann, for example, states that ethnicity “is a natural phenomenon with its foundations in family and kinship ties” (Baumann 12). Ethnicity is assigned at birth and cannot be changed. It constitutes a fundamental bond that is stronger than social links. Taking this view, ethnicism represents an essentialist approach denying the unsteady and fluent nature of cultures (Baumann 13).

Despite the similarity to nationalism in this interpretation of ethnicity, they are not the same. There can be a number of ethnicities in one nation state and, still, its members may identify with their particular ethnic group rather than with the larger group of nationals.

Aside from conquest, the multi-ethnicity of nation states was to a large part a consequence of migration. The ethnic pluralisation of nations has, however, no influence on the fact that the dominant ethnicity will be the one of the state-carrying majority (Han 2005, 331). The ethnic immigrants become members of *minority groups*. In this position, it is very difficult for them to assert themselves against the majority. For people with a strong ethnic consciousness, this marginalisation affects their identity. Members of ethnic groups compensate for the lack of recognition by the core society by building a strong solidarity as a matter of protection.

It is of “crucial importance, for subordinate peoples, of asserting their indigenous cultural traditions and retrieving their repressed histories” which, however, bears the “dangers of the fixity and fetishism of identities within the calcification of colonial cultures to recommend that ‘roots’ be struck in the celebratory romance of the past or by homogenizing the history of the present” (Bhabha 1994, 9). This then leads to a process of “ethnicising” (German

Ethnisierung), that does not only come from outside but emerges from within (Han 2009, 321).

Ethnic groups with a strong social cohesion may come up with different strategies to deal with their marginal status. Anthony D. Smith lists various variants how minority groups enact their opposition to the majority group, including *isolation* and *separatism* (Han 2009, 321/2). The outcome of such a reaction is a *pluricultural* society. The strategies of ethnic minorities to isolate or separate themselves from the mainstream culture, however, are not needed in a society in which the different ethnic groups are respected and neither discriminated against, nor pressured into assimilation. This form of society, which is tolerant of ethnic diversity and difference, is called *multicultural*. Multicultural societies are optimistic of immigration and promote ethnic culture in literature, art, economy, and media (Han 2009, 337).

Another term that draws on the concept of cultural or ethnic identities is *cultural diversity*. Homi K. Bhabha highly criticises this concept, which he claims is a myth, created by society. It fails to represent the actual complexity of identity and tends to reproduce essentialist ideas of the existence of holistic, organic cultures. To him, the promotion of cultural diversity in a multicultural society leads to the “containment of cultural difference” (Bhabha 1990, 208).

3.1.3 From hybridity to third space

For hybrid identities, belonging cannot be traced back to only *one* source, but two (or more). A hybrid emerges from the fusion of (at least) two things, forming something new. Even though the output can only exist of parts from the input, Bhabha points out that the “process of cultural hybridity gives rise to something different, something new and unrecognisable, a new area of negotiation of meaning and representation” (1990, 211). In the case of identity, hybridity means that a person who has more than one cultural background intermingles them by means of *syncretism* and *bricolage* (Lavie and Swedenburg 8).

A flaw of the traditional understanding of hybridity is the presumption of the existence of once clearly distinct cultures. This “essentialism of a prior given original or originary culture” (Bhabha 1990, 211) does not reality. In an interview with Jonathan Rutherford, Bhabha denies “the essentialism” of culture and affirms that “all forms of cultures are continually in a process of hybridity” (1990, 211).

He suggests that hybrids are not the products of crossings of pure, clearly defined cultures, but rather, they breed a *third space*:

For me, the importance of hybridity is not to be able to trace two original moments from which the third emerges, rather hybridity to me is the “third space”, which enables other positions to emerge. This third space displaces the histories that constitute it, and set up new structures of authority, new political initiative, which are inadequately understood through received wisdom. (Bhabha 1990, 211)

The third space is filled with contradiction and ambivalence, emerging from the multiple cultural influences that present individuals with more than one version of the truth. The immigrants are challenged to “navigate and form different cultures and customs, some of which are already constructed from more than two cultures and spaces” (Newton 4).

By constructing a third space, immigrants create a niche for themselves, placed somewhere between different cultural spaces. This *in-between* space is detached from localities. The immigrants carry their source of identification with them wherever they go. By belonging to neither fully to their home culture, nor the culture of the receiving country, immigrants fit in everywhere and nowhere at the same time.

Also people who are not, strictly speaking, immigrants but rather “global nomads” (Macgregor Wise 19) or expatriates, build their identity on a mixture of cultural influences, hence they are named *Third Culture Kids* (TCK). Mostly, this term applies to “children of diplomats, staff members of international organizations, military personnel, missionaries and teachers” (Baumgartner 3) who do not grow up in once place but whose childhood is marked by a variety of homes in different places. In terms of identity, these children are not related to one particular culture or nationality. Instead they incorporate parts of each culture that somehow plays a role in their upbringing and form an assemblage of homes. Assemblage, as described by John Macgregor Wise, is a “heterogeneous collection of people and things” (19), places and languages. A definition of TCK goes as follows:

A Third Culture Kid (TCK) is a person who has spent a significant part of his or her developmental years outside the parents’ culture. The TCK builds relationships to all cultures, while not having full ownership in any. Although elements from each culture are assimilated into the TCK’s life experience, the sense of belonging is in relationship to others of similar background. (Pollock and Van Reken 2001, 19; qtd. in Baumgartner 4; Macgregor Wise 20)

However, also this concept has received criticism. By pointing out that TCKs form a sense of belonging among each other, David C. Pollock and Ruth E. Van Reken suggest that their “third culture” forms a category of identity constructed by through their shared experience of

being TCKs. Thus, the very characteristic of “not-belonging” to a particular culture, makes them belong to each other. Macgregor Wise (21), however, criticises this stance by noting that the similarities between TCKs are rather superficial regarding the fact that they do not only include children of the elite but also those of refugees and impoverished immigrant families. The reason why TCKs think of themselves as a group with a common identity is their “desire for affiliation” and “finding others who understand and who have similar experiences” (Macgregor Wise 21).

3.1.4 Transcultural identities in transnational spaces

The assumption of an existence of transnationality calls for a specific treatment of the question of identity. Transnational practices have an impact upon the daily experience and outlooks of immigrants. By being part of more than one culture, they are endowed with “a dual frame of references” (Vertovec 2008, 153). They automatically compare situations in the country of residence with those of their second home country. This phenomenon of joining localities is referred to as *bifocality* by Steven Vertovec (2008, 153) and stems from a “chronic, contradictory transnationalism”. Often the dilemma of combining aspects of life *here* and *there* and the constant pursuit of contradictory truths leads to frustration and a crisis of identity.

Katy Gardner conducted a research, investigating the experience of bifocality of Sylhetis in Britain and Bangladesh. Her findings show that the constant wish to compromise between *desh* (home) and *bidesh* (foreign context) – terms the Sylhetis use to refer to the dual localities of migrants – leads to a kind of cognitive tension:

Co-existing, sometimes uneasily, with this set of images and ideals is the centrality of *desh* to group identity, and the spiritual powers with which it is linked. There is therefore a constant balancing of the two views, between the economic and political power of *bidesh*, and the fertility and spirituality of *desh*. This continual ambivalence, and negotiation of what might appear to be oppositional presentations of the world, is an integral part of migration and the contradictions which it involves. (Gardner 1/2)

The approach to transcultural identity by Glick Schiller and Levitt is less problematic. They argue that the “incorporation in a new state and enduring transnational attachments are not binary opposites” (190). Instead, they propose to look at transnationalism as a specific mode in which the migrant pivots between places. Depending on the context, attachments and movements can swing back and forth and are capable of changing direction over time.

Individuals who are part of transnational social fields and take part in actual transcultural practices do not necessarily also have a transcultural identity. According to Levitt and Glick Schiller, there is a difference between “ways of being in social fields as opposed to ways of belonging” (189). Individuals embedded into transnational networks have the potential to act within this social field but need not identify with any “label or cultural policy” of that field. It is possible that people practice certain religions, eat traditional food, and celebrate specific holidays, not because they are signalling any conscious identification with the ethnicity of their ancestral home, but because they “do what their family has always done”. A person, however, who feels a sense of belonging, will also act with an awareness and consciousness of the kind of identity his/her action signifies (Levitt and Glick Schiller 190).

3.1.5 Diaspora

“Transnational” and “multicultural” are terms that appear relatively frequently and in a number of different contexts. Often, people use this term without paying attention to their respective conceptual meanings. Roy Summer criticises the extensive and vague way of using them, above all because he considers them to be “utopian vision[s] of newness and intercultural intermingling” (158). According to him, a much more realistic and appropriate concept to describe the ways of living of immigrant cultures in the receiving countries, he suggests, is the concept of *diaspora*.

The term “diaspora” traditionally was used to refer to the dispersion of Jews around the globe and their belief in a return to their legitimate homeland. In terms of contemporary cultural studies, it describes “all expatriate groups who chose, or were forced, to leave their native countries for a variety of reasons” (Summer 159). One of their significant features is that “in their new countries, these diasporic subjects form ethnic or cultural minorities while still retaining strong affiliations with their – or, more often, their ancestors’ homelands” (Summer 159).

Despite the fact that members of diasporic groups include a vast variety of different people with different life stories and self-conceptions, they still share similarities. One of the common features of diasporic identities is that they share the communal experience of displacement and belonging. The loss of their cultural, ethnic and geographical roots enforces “collective mythmaking” (Summer 159), to compensate for this loss. The fictional narratives of their cultural heritages are idealised and create an impression of homogeneity.

As stated by Summer (159), “diasporas generally preserve an essentialist world-view and tend to be exclusivist, presenting their own culture as the desirable norm”. However, this applies not to the majority of migrants. The normative tendencies within diaspora only apply to communities that are victims to oppression by the dominant culture and use the idealisation of home as a token of resistance to external pressure of assimilation. Nevertheless, ethnocentrism of diasporic identity and its clinginess to idealised versions of cultural roots distinguishes it from hybrid identity (Summer 164/5).

They may respond to [...] challenges by adapting to the new way of life or by holding on to the traditions and beliefs of their homelands. These two attitudes may be labelled ‘transcultural’ and ‘diasporic’. Of course, I am not suggesting that there are only two ways to respond to multi-ethnicity. Diasporic and transcultural multiculturalism can, rather, be considered as two opposite ends of a scale that includes various combinations of essentialist notions of ‘race’ and collective identities, pragmatic approaches to cultural pluralism and cosmopolitan visions of free choice between different cultural roots and traditions. (Summer 177)

3.1.6 Conclusion

The analysis of this multitude of models of identities reflects two major types. On the one hand, there are concepts that depict identity to be a rather fixed category. The source of identification is a constructed, but stable entity, such as “the nation” or “the ethnic group”. Pluri- and multiculturalism, as well as proclamations of ethnic diversity, keep up essentialist definitions of culture and maintain difference as distinction criteria. Also those who think of themselves as diasporic peoples have a stable group with which they identify.

Less transparent are the roots of hybrids, since they are sometimes not recognisable in products of syncretism. However, there are some essentialist voices that claim that hybridity refers back to pure cultures that are believed to once have been original and authentic. Bhabha, therefore, suggests the term “third space” as a replacement.

Much more complex is the concept of transcultural identity that fails to rely on normative categories as their identification source. Transnational fields have no clear boundaries and transcultural identities no clear definitions. The defining characteristic of transcultural identities may be that they are undefined. Transcultural people cannot draw from singular

sources of identification. They are not provided with transparent norms of good behaviour or bad, right or wrong.

Which kind of identity people resume after a crucial turning point in their lives, such as migration, depends on many factors. Lastly, it is a question of individual resources and personality how people manage their new identities as immigrants. The challenges and their potential psychosocial consequences involved in migration are the topic of the following chapter.

3.2 Psychosocial consequences of migration

Migration, as a rule, causes radical changes and disturbances that can be metaphorically described as an *uprooting* from the soil. In order to stay alive, new roots have to be taken in another place. The more this new place differs from the old, the more difficult the adjustment will be. Migrants are people that are torn from their natural grounds and transplanted to a new environment. The reach of the consequences of a disruption of normality experienced by migrants is massive and may result in psychological hassle.

Migrants are facing a double strain: the loss of accustomed reference systems on the one hand, and the confrontation with a completely new one, on the other hand. Through the exposure to a new social reality, migrants are abruptly “dissocialised” (Han 2009, 205) and have to start a process of acquisition of the rules and norms effective in the new country. Frequently, this process is accompanied by emotional instability, disorientation and existential fear.

In addition to questions of re-socialisation, also the consequences of the experience of having abandoned home have to be looked at. Psychologically, emigration is often followed by confusion of role- and self-identity (Schneider). Moreover, the migrants’ situation is additionally burdened by “the external pressure of assimilation to the traditions of the cultural majority” as well as “internal tensions between different generations” within their own family (Summer 177).

In the following chapters, different causes for the potential identity crises of migrants will be looked at. The discussion includes the difficulties disrupted identities bring along, as well as the opportunities they open up to find new versions of self.

3.2.1 Loss of speech community

One of the most disturbing factors of the migration experience is the necessity to learn a new language. The acquisition of language interlocks with the acquisition of modes of thinking and conceptualisations of reality of those using the language. Since for children the language learning process happens within specific social groups, such as the family, school, neighbourhood etc., the integration into these groups is a self-evident by-product. Native speakers master a language beyond grammatical and idiomatic precision. They also know the semantic and pragmatic functions of the language and implement them automatically. Thus, they can communicate easily with other people within the language group. Typically, people develop person-related, individual ways of expressions that become an integral part of their identity (Han 2009, 208/9). Language is the most important means of communication between human beings. Han stresses that

[i]n sprachlicher Kommunikation tauschen Menschen gegenseitig ihre Erfahrungen, Erlebnisse, Erkenntnisse und Wissensbestände, d.h. ihre Bewusstseinsinhalte aus, die ihren mehr oder minder gemeinsamen gesellschaftlichen Lebensbedingungen und sozialen Erfahrungen resultieren. Sie fühlen sich dabei als Repräsentanten einer gemeinsamen Sprache und entwickeln ein gemeinsames Zugehörigkeitsgefühl, das nicht nur miteinander verbindet, sondern auch soziale Sicherheit gibt. (Han 2009, 209)

Migration, in most cases, means leaving one's speech community and hence one's communicative security that has been acquired in the course of the linguistic socialisation in the home country. Migrants simultaneously lose their direct attachment to a historically grown and dynamic community of shared knowledge and experience. The loss of speech community can lead to *communicative isolation*, reinforcing the psychosocial instability of the immigrant (Han 2009, 209).

3.2.2 Loss of social interaction fields

Humans are social beings, *animale social*, as formulated already by Aristotle (Han 2009, 210). Based on George Herbert Mead's social interaction theory, identity construction is always related back to experiences in a group. Self-consciousness and identity do not exist from birth on but are the result of specific kinds of relations between individuals and society. The experience of the *self* is made not directly but *reflexively* from the perspective of the other. Individuals discover themselves first by how other people behave in relation to them.

The development of self-consciousness, therefore, is dependent on the ability to take an objective, distanced point of view upon oneself (Blumer 1994, 267).

According to Mead's theory, the self consists of two parts, the *me* and the *I*. The *me* is the part of self that is constructed by assuming the role of the generalised other. *Me* is the part of self that is constructed by assuming the role of the generalised other. *Me* is shaped by the values and expectations of society. Without the *me*, the individual cannot be part of the society. The *I*, on the contrary, does not react according to expectations by others but is spontaneous and incalculable. It embodies the individual freedom and initiatives and, thus, represents the counterpart of *me*. Identity is the product of both – *me* and *I*. If a person lacks participation in social interaction, the needs to build a stable identity with a balanced *me* and *I*, are not met (Blumer 1966, 535-544).

Successful social interaction presupposes a common *symbolic basis*. Usually, the interpretation scheme for a group's sign-system is acquired as part of a person's socialisation. To migrate means to leave the familiar interaction field behind and enter a new one. The task to read the expectations and accepted problem solving strategies is impeded by an inability to decipher a group's sign system. In many cases, the results are discretisation and stigmatisation (Han 2009, 212/3). The incapability to construct a stable social identity simultaneously prevents the unfolding of one's individual identity and hinders self-fulfilment and need satisfaction.

3.2.3 Loss of occupation

Work is a prominent part of life and provides an important source of meaning and self-definition. "Individuals form, transform, and modify how they define themselves and others in the context of work-based situations and activities" (Dutton 265). This work-related fraction of identity is referred to as *occupational identity*, *professional identity* or *organizational identity* (Dutton 265).

For those who already had a profession, migration often compels leaving this profession and find a new job. Since work, in modern societies determines a person's income, standard of living, self-definition and social status, losing one's profession can have serious economic and psychological consequences. The readjustment in the work market is especially hard for those immigrants who come from high status professions but can only find jobs for which they are actually overqualified. Due to structural disadvantages or language deficits they are degraded

in the job market. The low-status, often ill-paid occupations do not offer a self-definition that is agreeable to those individuals. It often takes a long process in which the migrants seek to re-establish themselves professionally in the new society. Their efforts to manage their relationship between work and identity in a manner which enhances, rather than threatens their self-conceptions, are often in vain. Especially female and older persons are affected by disadvantages in the occupational sphere (Price 305/6).

3.2.4 Loss of home

People who move to another country are not only received as *strangers* but also experience themselves as such. This status as stranger in a community can place a great amount of psychological stress on the immigrant (Han 2009, 232). The main source of this stress are the conflicting realities of distance and closeness. Georg Simmel in his essay “Exkurs über den Fremden” puts it in a nutshell, stating that “[d]ie Einheit von Nähe und Entferntet, die jegliches Verhältnis zwischen Menschen enthält ist hier zu einer, am kürzesten so zu formulierenden Konstellation gelangt: die Distanz innerhalb des Verhältnisses bedeutet, dass der Nahe fern ist, das Fremdsein aber, dass der Ferne nah ist” (509). In a physical sense, the stranger is distant to the place where he/she comes from. However, psychologically, he/she is still close to this place, whereas the place close to him/her feels distant because he/she is not yet accustomed to the conditions and people in the new surroundings. As an effect of the contradiction of physical and psychological distance/closeness, the immigrant retains a feeling of displacement and not belonging (Han 2009, 233/4). In this condition of being neither here nor there, migrants experience difficulties to settle in the new country and build a home.

Home, however, is something very central to our well-being and constitutes an essential part of the development and maintaining of identities (Fog Olwig 225). Home is “where one best knows oneself” (Rapport and Dawson 9). Hence, one of the immediate consequences of migration can be an identity crisis, the sensation of losing ground and self-alienation.

In a definition relevant in this context, *home* is not strictly related to one specific place, like someone’s house, town or birth country. A more accurate description of what home can be is given by Macgregor Wise, referring to home as a process: “[the] process of shaping spaces, uses, and meanings to create and maintain identity, to create and maintain a space of comfort” (18). Migrants sometimes fail to construct a home that is within their reach and instead keep lingering in the past. This homesickness often is a reaction to the isolation, frustration and

threat they face in their new place of living. What is remembered as home, very often, is idealised and retrospectively glamorised (Han 2009, 226).

In extreme cases, homesickness can expand to a medical condition, which in psychiatric terms is referred to *nostalgic fixation* (Han 2009, 226). Some of the symptoms include anorexia, irregular heartbeat, digestive disorders, high blood pressure, insomnia and even hallucinations for those severely afflicted (Routledge et al. 3). Homesickness or nostalgia, although not always pathologically, affects many migrants. Next to its negative emotional effects, it is claimed also to have positive functions, as for example, to preserve a sense of meaning in the migrant's life (Routledge et al. 3).

A common coping strategy with on-going feelings of homesickness is a retirement from reality and increasing living in the idealised past.

The nostalgic addiction of the exilic narrative is a psychic split – living in a story in which one's past becomes radically different from the present and in which the homeland becomes sequestered in the imagination as a mythic, static realm. That realm can be idealized or demonized, but the past can all too easily become not only another country but a space of projections and fantasies. Some people decide to abandon the past, never to look back. For others, the great lure is nostalgia – an excess of memory. (Hoffman 52)

Losing a home does, however, not always mean that there can be no other substitution than the imagination of a mystified home. In many cases, migrants come up with coping strategies, discovering that the migration, loss of home and the disruption of identity also provide possibilities to develop their selves and may broaden their horizon. Migrants who arrive at hybrid, transnational or third space identities, may establish a conception of home as something “‘plurilocal’, something to be taken along when whenever one decamps” (Rapport and Dawson 7). To be at home is no longer a matter of being at a certain *place*. Instead, home is process, and therefore can be *made* everywhere, losing the imperative of locality. Thus, home “is neither here nor there [...] rather, itself a hybrid, it is *both* here *and* there – an amalgam, a pastiche, a performance” (Bammer ix, qtd. in Rapport and Dawson 7). In this case, the migration experience is enrichment to the individual.

3.2.5 Benefits of a new beginning

In some cases, the breaking of home ties can also have positive aspects. The migrants are freed from the social pressure and control that had been exercised on them in their original

countries. Through the challenge to deal with completely new and unknown realities, they have to emancipate themselves and widen their horizons. All their energies are activated to invest into the new opportunities that may await them. They are no longer bound to the imperatives of their local traditional societies. In the new country an immigrant is *a tabula rasa* with the potential for a more sophisticated self. In this sense they can become “freer people” (Han 2009, 238). Their impartiality towards the unknown makes them more cosmopolitan and open to mount new paths.

Simmel (510/1), moreover, states that migrants, in the early stages, when they are still strangers in the new country are in the position of outsiders which allows them to view the world with greater objectivity. They have bird’s eye view of what happens around them, a perspective rarely accessible for the in-siders of a society. Their opinions about local political and other public affairs are less biased because they are not organically connected to their place of residence.

Especially to those immigrants who leave their homelands due to traumatic experiences such as war or personal tragedies, the migration can mean a new beginning, away from the atrocities of their past. However, the change of place might not help trauma to resolve but rather travel along. Victims of violence or physical torture need additional counselling, in order to cope with their trauma and eventually be able to get rid of it.

3.2.6 Conclusion

Migration is without doubt a life-altering event in a person’s life with consequences on various levels. Basically, all that a person has learned to be true in social interaction is subverted. In a way, immigrants become children again that have to socialise from anew, including the learning of the language. Depending on a wide range of factors (age, education, reason for the movement, treatment in the receiving country, etc.) , some have more trouble to come to terms with the transition, whereas others may never overcome the trauma of being uprooted.

4 Immigrant Fiction

The last of the theoretical chapters will point to different aspects of the debate in contemporary ethnic literature studies. Although immigrant writing has a long history, it was only during the last century that the works of ethnic minorities began to be recognised as part of the national literatures. However, in the meantime, a large canon of novels by respected immigrant authors developed and entered the curriculum of today's academic literary theory.

Additionally to the history of the genre, also the common features of the works of immigrants will be discussed here. Despite the variations in style, genre and themes, especially regarding the importance of negotiations of identities, also some similarities can be found.

4.1 What is “immigrant fiction”?

The following section intends to examine some of the general developments in the recognition of writings produced of migrant authors in different time periods and how they were categorised and labelled. Afterwards, the focus shifts to more specific information on New American Immigrant Fiction and its writers, matching the background of the novels analysed at a later point of this thesis.

4.1.1 Developments in American immigrant fiction

The USA went through four different waves of immigration: the colonial period, the mid-19th century, the early 20th century and the post 1965 period. These waves of immigration are distinguished by the different immigration laws in the respective periods. The possibilities to access the USA differed according to nationality and/or race, family status, occupation and the reason for the emigration (Byrant).

The fourth wave of immigration, which is relevant for this thesis, was initiated with the enacting of the 1965 *Immigration and Nationality Act*, also referred to as *Hart-Celler-Act*. This new law marked a radical change because it abolished the nation-origin quota-system. Instead, a preference system according to skill and relationships with US-residents regulated who was accepted in the country. The demographical result was a general increase of the number of immigrants from the developing world, especially from Latin America and Asia (see Focus Migration).

In accordance with the legal and demographic differences in the four epochs, also the topics taken up by immigrant writers varied, as well as formal and stylistic features. A general difference in the literature of the post-1965 period is the abandonment of the melting-pot model of American society and the desirability of assimilation (Newton 1) which were central motives in earlier novels by, for example, Anzia Yezierska or Henry Roth who arrived in 1901 and 1907, respectively (Coward 1).

4.1.2 Scholarly and public recognition

The literature by immigrant writers has suffered what Thomas J. Ferraro calls “academic ghettoization” (6). He denounces the fact that “ethnic novels have long been considered the poor stepsisters of a benighted realist family: stereotypical in plot and characterization, assimilationist in drive, contestable even as social evidence, and of interest only to group members and historians” (1). Only in the late 1980s and early 1990s, new approaches to the study of immigrant literature developed emanating from Great Britain. In contrast to other former colonialist empires, post-colonial English writing was treated as part of the national literature (Sievers 215).

One of the leading characters in the re-evaluation of immigrant writing was the cultural studies theorist Homi K. Bhabha. He publicly spoke out against the hierarchisation of different literary genres. The new immigrant writers, he proclaimed, were pioneers in how they displayed cultural realities. IN their works the division of culture into binary opposites, the “The West” and “The Third World” are uncovered as a construction which tries to disguise the ambivalence of hybridity that is inherent in all cultures. Instead of wrongly being read as historical documents, it should be recognised that immigrant literatures stand for a change in the understanding of culture. They raise awareness for the fact that personal as well as national identities are in constant movement and are always hybrids. The works display “a world beyond ethnic and national categorisation” (Sievers 219). It is the immigrant’s “double vision” (Bhabha 2003, 7/8) that makes him possible to see this truth.

Immigrant writers did not only face difficulties in terms of academic appreciation, but also on the literary market. Ethnic literature “had been produced for, issued by, and received into the *national* marketplace [emphasis added]” (Ferraro 6) despite its undervaluation. Yet, certain expectations by the publishing industry, which was – and still is – dominated by white/Western companies, had to be met. Sievers mentions the pressure applied by British

publishing houses of the 1930s on writers from India as an example. Allegedly, a lector from *Allan and Unwin* requested Raja Rao to make modifications in his novel *Kanthapura*, where he translated idioms and expressions in the Kannada language literally into English (223).

However, adaptation to the mainstream is not the key to success for migrant authors. According to the respective demand on the literary market, publishers either call for assimilation or the very opposite: difference and exoticism:

In der jeweiligen Mehrheit wurden und werden diese LiteratInnen gern in die ethnische Ecke gedrängt. Man erwartet von ihren Werken, dass sie authentischen Einblick in das Leben und die Probleme der jeweiligen Minderheit geben, wobei die KritikerInnen bestimmen, was als authentisch gilt, und dabei zumindest momentan das Exotische und Fremde favorisieren. Das hat [...] zur Folge, dass jene AutorInnen, die diese Erwartungen nicht erfüllen, in der Öffentlichkeit kaum wahrgenommen werden. (Sievers 228)

Many writers may financially feel the constraint to yield to the expectations of publishers; nevertheless, there always have been movements that support literatures by minorities. Examples are the journal *Arart* in Western Germany of the 1970s (Sievers 222) and the journal *MELUS* founded in 1973 by the society for the Multi--ethnic Literature of the United States (Ferraro 4). In the US, journals such as *El Grito* (1967-1974), and *Grito del Sol* (1976-1982) served as a forum for Latino literature and helped to fuel its literary renaissance in the 1960s (Peck 133). A journal that supported the recognition of Asian American authors as early as 1971 is *Amerasia* (see AASC).

Another obstacle for writers of minority groups to achieve literary recognition is the issue of language. Many works of immigrant fiction are written by non-native speakers of English. For authors like Julia Alvarez and Lan Cao, who came to the US in their early teens, English and literary mastery was a paramount necessity to becoming accomplished writers. Both authors recall the moment where they had overcome their language barrier as liberating and empowering (Cowart 9, Cao Interview 176). Without doubt, in order to access the national market, there is no alternative for immigrant authors than choosing to write in English, even though it is not their mother tongue. However, the empowerment brought by the use of the English language does not come without a price. According to Richard Rodriguez, “one’s writing in English constitutes an automatic estrangement from the authentic language/culture/self” (Cowart 9/10). Although, one might question the uncompromising tone

of this statement, the position of English as medium for immigrant literature remains controversial.

Authors who want to keep some of their mother tongue in the narrative continue to use non-translated expressions and combine the languages of the ancestral *and* resident country. While for some, this is perceived as gain, adding to the texts expressivity, others, like David Peck, even refer to it as a “problem”, stating that “readers who are not bilingual have difficulty reading individual works” (131).

4.1.3 Categorisation

Practices of categorisation of immigrant novels have continuously been under discussion. One part of the criticism rejects the idea of creating a separate category for immigrant writing within the national literature. It is argued that the act of excluding ethnic writing from the national canon is a marginalisation of these literatures (Sievers 221). On the hand, placing migrant novels within the national body of literature is a dis-acknowledgement of its unique quality. According to this line of argumentation, it is important to notice that migrant fiction forms a distinct genre with its own characteristics (Sievers 230).

In the last decades, literature studies have reached common ground on the view that there is no unproblematic way of categorising different works by migrants (Sievers 220). Paul Gilroy claims that traditional criteria of categorising and assessing literature, in general, do not apply to the new writings by immigrant authors (Sievers 230).

In this thesis, the term immigrant literature is used to define all writing that is concerned with the theme of migration, regardless of the place of birth of the author. There are, for example authors that did not experience migration themselves, but still write “ethnic literature” or deal with aspects of migration. Similarly, writers who have experienced migration first-hand may deal with topics entirely unrelated to migration. Thus, it seems logical to categorise according to topic instead of cultural background.

A common way of categorising ethnic writing is by grouping it according to the geographical origins of the various authors. By referring to labels like “*Irish-American fiction, The Italian-American Novel, Jewish-American Literature, Asian-American Literature* and *Chicano Authors*”, “separated hyphenated spheres” are created that suggest that “ethnic authors operated in artistic ghettos apart from mainstream” (Ferraro 4). A new perspective on the group-by-group approach has been offered by Werner Sollors’ influential book *Beyond*

Ethnicity which was published in 1986. There, he argues that ethnic writing is more than the documentation of the dilemmas and hardships of specific groups of immigrants. The crucial element that lies at the heart of immigrant writing is that it is a “ritual enacting Americanization” (Ferraro 7). In that, all ethnic writing is the same.

It may be true that the essence of ethnic writing is uninfluenced by the cultural origin of the particular pieces. Nevertheless, for a literary analysis a contextualisation within social history is helpful.

4.2 Migrant writers

The question of who the writers of immigrant fiction are is interesting, not only because it is their immigrant status that defines the genre. Much of their individual experiences inspire their stories. The way they feel about themselves as immigrants, how they manage to come to terms with their heritage and how their life in the new country turned out, shapes the design of their narratives and their characters.

4.2.1 Generation

Writers of immigrant fiction encompass different generations of immigrants. First-generation-immigrants are those who were born in their homeland, whereas second- and third-generation-immigrants are counted among those who were already born in the receiving country (Coward 1).

This definition allows for a new categorisation but, still, is not too helpful in practice. In fact, most of the authors of New Immigrant Literature are born on foreign soil but migrated with their parents already at a young age (Newton 2). Even though they definitely classify as first generation, their way of experiencing their immigrant status might resemble that of the second generation, since most of their socialisation takes place in the receiving country. “If at times these writers seek to represent the old country, they must do so at second hand: they must construct pre-diasporic settings through the myth-making memories of their immigrant parents” (Coward 2). American-born immigrants may not be tied to their ancestral culture as strongly as the first generation because they have no eyewitness-experience of it (Newton 12). Still, much of the cultural roots is stored in the collective memory of the family and is handed on from generation to generation.

These writers, who stand between the labels of first and second generation, including the authors of the three novels selected for this paper¹, mostly assume hybrid or transnational identities. In contrast to “peers who, defining themselves as expatriates (Salman Rushdie, Janette Turner Hospital) or exiles (Solzheinitzsyn or, [...] Aleksandar Hemon), seldom write fiction about the country in which they are guests”, transnational writers are “availing themselves of the American’s right to reflect positively or negatively yon the nation” (Coward 4). More frequently than their first-generation ancestors, second-, third-, or later generations directly address issues connected to their immigrant status and their repeated struggle to define their identities.

[T]he “younger” authors represent a particular group of “hyphenated²” U.S. Americans who possess an intense awareness of their migrant heritage even though they do not physically move from their homelands to the United States. Just as writers of the second or later generations effectively demonstrate their puzzling and unusual ties to and perceptions of their homelands they have never seen, the eyewitness writers [...] present powerful, effective and distinctive demonstrations of the facts about and fears of their actual migrations and the ensuing repercussions. (Newton 13)

4.2.2 Autobiography and authenticity

Immigrant writing typically reflects the life of the authors marked by particular experience arising from their immigrant status. The high frequency of autobiographical references in this genre is connected to the motivation that makes immigrants write books. Very often, writing has a therapeutic function for them (Sievers 224). In other cases, like Lan Cao’s, writing a novel, *Monkey Bridge*, based on her personal experiences was not away of coming to terms with an inner crisis. In an interview she states that she “did the grappling” before the book. Nevertheless, putting “language into feelings” made this process “more pronounced” allowed her to re-evaluate it, since writing down what she experienced made her “feel about the story differently” (Cao, *Interview* 176).

However, even if an immigrant novel may be based on real events, it would be wrong to automatically assume they are accurate autobiographic accounts. Neither of the authors of the three novels of this thesis’ analysis, for example, classifies their work as autobiography or memoir (see Interviews). Cao states “the feelings, the emotions, perhaps, are

¹ García was born on Havana, in 1958 and emigrated in 1960. Cao left Vietnam in 1975 at the age of 13. Lahiri, born in 1967 in London, moved to America at the age of 2.

² E.g.: Asian-American instead of Asian American (hyphen in-between)

autobiographical” but “it is not as if every event actually happened” (173). The novels are based on the personal experiences and life stories of the authors as far as they are *immigrants*, but do not necessarily bear autobiographical facts.

There are different terms used to describe the kind of writing that is based on real-life events, but neither qualifies as pure (auto)biography or memoir, nor is entirely fictional. A common way to refer to these, only sparsely defined modes of writing has been to subsume them under the umbrella-term *life-writing* (Davis et al. 11-21). Life writing is no less valuable than actual autobiographical writing. The fact, that they tell fictionalised versions of the actual events does not mean that the authors intend to distort the truth. Indeed, they try to tell an even more truthful account of their experiences. Changing some details is a tool that helps them to achieve this goal. Pauline T. Newton refers to Alvarez, explaining that “by using their creative faculties, the authors aim to decipher or convey their ‘sense of the world’” (Newton 14). The writers are no slaves to their memory. If they need to tell something about their lives differently from what they remember, they can do so.

“Auto-biography” means “a life written by a self” (Flohr 2). The *self*, however, is elusive and changeable and thus difficult to translate into a text. Especially in migrant fiction which deals with this very problem, the ways of going about this task are very diverse. It needs a high amount of creativity and literary strategy to write about a *self* that is partly a stranger to oneself. Moreover, the self is constructed and changed in the very moment and by the act of writing. The person who writes the book is a different person by the time the book is read (Newton 15). It therefore makes not much sense to insist on clear divisions of fiction and non-fiction.

In contrast to the novel by Cao, in the case of García and Lahiri, the question of fiction and non-fiction is less complicated, since they have less autobiographical references. As far as Cristina García is concerned, her novel *Dreaming In Cuban* is not based on her life story. Nonetheless, as García points out in an interview, the novel was the result of her personal quest for identity. After she returned to Cuba for the first time after eleven years (García, Atlantic), she realised that she did not fit there, just as she did not fit in the Cuban exile community in Miami. It was this experience that prompted her to write *Dreaming in Cuban* (García, *Conversation* 249). The character of Pilar, which she named after her daughter, shares some similarities with García’s own life:

I think of Pilar as kind of an alter ego for me. I grew up with a very bifurcated sense of myself. At home, things were intensely Cuban. In the rest of my life, it had very little meaning. I probably thought of myself, first and foremost, as a New Yorker – an urban kid with an affinity for many cultures yet beholden to none. It wasn't until I started to write fiction that my private Cuban self merged with my public self. Now I feel that I live more on the hyphen than on either side of it. (García, *Conversation* 251)

Like the hyphen stand *between* the American and Cuban, García positions herself in-between the two cultures. In a later interview, however, she refers to herself as “American writer with an accent” (García, *Atlantic*) which illustrates the inconsistency of migrants in relating to their cultural heritage.

Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Namesake* reflects much of her own experiences. Like the protagonist in the novel, Lahiri was born to Bengali parents, grew up in New England and later moved to New York City. The novel's “terrain is very much the terrain of my own life”, she states in an interview, “- New England and New York, with Calcutta always hovering in the background” (Lahiri, *Debut Novel*). The characters in the novel must struggle with the ambivalence of belonging and not belonging to one place at the same time. For Lahiri, a British-born Indian-American, the question of belonging is especially tricky: “I never know how to answer the question ‘Where are you from?’ If I say I'm from Rhode Island, people are seldom satisfied” (Lahiri, *Debut Novel*). It is this autobiographical fact of Lahiri's life – her migrant background and transculturality – that motivates her writing. “I never felt that I had any claim to any place in the world [...] in my writing, I've found my home, really, in a very basic sense – in a way that I never had one growing up” (Lahiri, *Transplanted Autor*).

In *The Namesake*, the protagonist's identity crisis has a second source, namely his lack of a good name. In this essence lies, at least, a kind of autobiographical truth:

I'm like Gogol in that my pet name inadvertently became my good name. I have two other names on my passport and my birth certificate (my mother couldn't settle on just one). But when I was enrolled in school the teachers decided that Jhumpa was the easiest of my names to pronounce and that was that. To this day many of my relatives think that it's both odd and inappropriate that I'm known as Jhumpa in an official, public context. (Lahiri, *Debut Novel*)

4.3 The characteristics of New Immigrant Fiction

This chapter aims to explore the common features of different works of New Immigrant Fiction. Although some motives show continuity, changing trends over time are observable.

In the following chapter, both, the individual characteristics of particular works of immigrant literature, as well as common patterns will be looked upon. A very valuable source for this undertaking is provided by David Cowart's book *Trailing Clouds: immigrant fiction in contemporary America*, where he attempts to list a core of common features of New Immigrant Literatures.

4.3.1 Characteristic themes and motives

Most migrant writers focus their novels not only on individual life stories, but on the collective experience of the respective group. The themes range from "labor fights to interracial marriage, from portraying family histories to asking searching questions about identity, from political issues to those of personal conduct" (Meißenburg 79). The primary, most outstanding theme of New Immigrant Fiction is the quest for identity. This theme became the basic tone of the immigrant writers' works, no matter what the other subject matters were. Until today, this trend has not changed.

The main characters, most commonly, are young adults who are presented in the midst of their struggle of turning from children to adults. Much of their tales resemble a typical coming-of-age drama. However, their situation is forever complicated by their migration background. Regarding the general thematic features of New Immigrant Fiction, Cowart lists:

- Travail in school, especially in connection with learning English
 - Narrators make wry, quasi-anthropological observations regarding immigrant diffidence vis-à-vis the self-assurance of native-born Americans
 - Views of what makes the homeland unliveable
 - In fictions written by women: eating disorders
 - Cultural contrast often represented as generational conflict (older immigrants at odd with their more easily Americanized children)
 - Old world sex prohibitions versus new world freedom, virginity as trope for ethnic integrity [...]
 - One parent missing, sometimes associated symbolically with the homeland
 - The mature immigrant re-enters childhood
- (7/8)

This list of frequently employed themes reflects how elementary the concern of migrant fiction is to deal with questions of identity. In a later part of the paper, the relevance of certain topics for the negotiation of identity will be discussed in greater detail.

4.3.2 Characteristic formal and stylistic features

A common, however, rather obsolete approach to immigrant literature, is to read it as a sociological document (Sievers 224). The value and function of the texts is seen to lie in their quality of being mirrors for reality. Sievers notices that in many cases this approach severely undermines the integrity of the author, stating that “in einigen Fällen bestimmt bei solche Interpretationen der Interpret, ob diese Realitäten von den Texten angemessen erfasst wurde, bezieht also eine dem Autor überlegene Position” (225). Moreover, reducing migrant literature to mere plot means to neglect the texts’ aesthetic value and deny their placement within literary arts. Also Cowart feels the need to stress that “whatever their value as sociological documents, these books stand out as fully accomplished examples of contemporary literary art” (2).

Indeed, immigrant fiction shows a high degree of stylistic elaboration and innovation. Immigrant authors

have written in all genres and experimented with new techniques. Folklore and literary forms of their country of origin are merged with or employed alongside Western styles of writing. The modes of expression are as manifold as there are different authors. (Meißenburg 79)

Cowart’s typology of the immigrant genre, however, seems less intrigued with formal features, as he lists only two: a “frequently fragmented narration” and the insertion of “old-country folktales or other material” (7).

A common technique employed in immigrant literature is the combination of languages. Many writers are bilingual and may have grown up in non-English speaking households. This second (or first) language connects them to the culture of their families. Identities are very much intertwined with languages. Thus, the inclusion of expressions in the writers’ mother tongues into the narratives serves as a means to tell their stories more authentically. Cristina García, whose first novel *Monkey Hunting* was released in English and Spanish, reflects about her connection to her second language in an interview:

Writing in English is often an act of translation for me, even though it’s my primary language. Since so much of what happens in my books takes place in Spanish, I feel an obligation to force English to accommodate the cadences and musicality of Spanish, to make it cha-cha-cha. I want the reader to feel as if they’re experiencing the world in Spanish even though they’re absorbing it in English. (García, Origins)

As this quote shows, the insertion of foreign language in the text is a strategy to let the reader experience more of the cultural spirit that often is associated with certain languages. The ways different authors use this strategy in their works varies considerably. More about this follows in the close analysis of the novels.

Also intertextuality is a very frequently employed technique involving a wide range of texts and is by far not limited to folktales, as Cowart suggests. Very frequently, poems or lyrics from songs are inserted into the texts, sometimes written by the author, sometimes quoted from other poets or musicians. Other text types that are interspersed into the narratives are, for example, letters or diary entries. With this strategy, the authors initiate a change of narrator voice and an effective shift of perspective.

A further method that serves a similar function, are streams of consciousness that draw through third person narratives. The special effect of this mode is the way intimacy between the reader and the narrator is created. Sometimes, in passages of streams of consciousness, a character speaks to himself, sometimes to another person, addressed either in second or third person.

Migrant novels are highly self-reflective. Very often, the main characters of the novels are writers, poets or in other ways engaged with art. They reflect on their feelings when they write, read, draw or make music and how these creative activities contribute to the expression of their identities. The questioning of the power of words adds to other postmodernist features of New Immigrant Literature.

4.4 Conclusion

Looking at a variety of New Immigrant Novels, one will notice that not all of them exhibit the same amount of the features listed above. The right balance of observing and violating conventions is important to keep the reader interested. As Cowart states, “one should be pleasantly oriented and disoriented at the same time” (6). To some extent, one could measure the originality of a piece of literature by its ability to configure the standard norms so that they transcend the formula.

5 Premise for the analysis of the selected novels

The practical part of this thesis is concerned with the analysis of three novels written by first- and second-generation-immigrants. The goal of the analysis is to find out which strategies are applied in order to reflect on issues of identity. These strategies include formal and stylistic devices and techniques, as well as the choices concerning the plot of the novels. The novels share some of these characteristics, but still place different emphases on certain topics and come up with variations of stylistic techniques. Part of the analysis is a comparison of the three novels.

In advance of the analysis, a number of parameters will be conducted to provide some guidance for the process. Since the aim is to track down how identity is negotiated in the novels, the question is where identity becomes visible. There are many aspects of our life that we use as reference points of our identity. When we question ourselves, who we are we might answer in various ways, dependent on the context we are in.

5.1 Aspects of identity

The simplest, and at the same time, most complex answer to the question who we are, is to say a *name*. A person always has more than one name. Normally, we have a first and a second name. The first name has been chosen specifically for us, whereas the second name is the name of the family. How a child is named differs from culture to culture. In *The Namesake*, the ritual of naming in the Indian culture clashes with the American. Lahiri taking up this theme can be seen as a strategy to deal with identity in the context of immigration.

Apart from our names, also our profession, or *what we do*, can use as identifier of who we are. We express ourselves through actions. Some people may feel a stronger connection to their profession, others to their free time occupations. Whether writing, making music, dancing, painting or drawing; art is always a way of self-expression. The consistency, with which authors of immigrant novels choose protagonists with artistic skills for their novels, seems to be not entirely co-incidental. The artistic side of the main characters shows their deep engagement with the question of their identity.

In many cases, we define ourselves also in *relation* to other people. In families we are mothers or fathers, sons or daughters, granddaughters and grandsons, brothers or sisters,

cousins, aunts or uncles. In marriages we are wives or husbands, in relationships boyfriends or girlfriends. All these different roles that we play in families or relationships define us and determine our lives. Sometimes, these roles are so strongly defined, that they overshadow the other parts of our selves. Pilar the protagonist of *Dreaming in Cuban*, goes as far as to state that “[t]he family is hostile to the individual” (García 134) and also *Monkey Bridge*’s Thanh believes in the teachings of Confucius that say “[t]he individual is always less important than the family” (see Sacred-texts). How we are expected to behave in these roles is very much culture dependent. As a consequence, in migrant families, it is possible that expectations of old and new worlds collide. These identities can, thus, easily become a burden and a source of inner conflicts.

Our physical appearance also reflects who we are. Often, when we feel ourselves uncomfortable with who we are, we also feel uncomfortable with how we look. Changes of identity often go hand in hand with changes of the *body*. We might try a different style of clothing or a new haircut. Not always the physical change has to follow the psychological. Sometimes, alterations of our body affect our identity. However, the extent to which we can transform our bodies is limited. For example, the fact, that bodies display the immigrant’s ethnic heritage is unchangeable. Many immigrants feel that their bodies stand in their way of constructing new selves.

In addition to the optic appearance of the body, also its health condition is a mirror of the state of our identity. Body and *psyche* are linked and influence each other on a constant basis. Often, it is difficult to say whether emotional problems run ahead of health problems or the other way around. Fact is that body and psyche are inseparable. In order to become stable selves, both must be healthy. Immigrants, who arrive in the new countries at a very early age or are already born there, are affected by their parents’ travail. These childhood troubles seldom resolve entirely, but remain in the unconscious and can be the reason for psychological issues in adult life.

Another important part of identity is *language*. We belong to people who speak the same language as we do. Social interaction strongly depends on language. When someone speaks with an accent, he/she quickly can be identified as stranger. However, language is more than a means of verbal communication. There is so much implied in the way people express themselves, that it is impossible that a non-native speaker can read all these clues. The unique use of language is significantly involved in the formation of identity.

Identity, however, is not only about how we speak, act, or look, but also about what we *believe*. The development of beliefs is normally influenced by the culture and family of our upbringing. Beliefs are what makes life meaningful. Spiritual, ethical and political beliefs are important to provide structure to our lives. Rituals and traditions help to keep beliefs alive and have a very important function in community and/or family life. However, if beliefs change, these rituals lose their meaning. Immigrants are confronted with different world views and belief systems. Often, as part of their identity crisis, they struggle to stipulate their own values.

Another aspect that is related to identity is *home*. Where a person can truly be him/herself, he/she is at home. The characters of the novels have different relationships to the two countries that they are connected with. For some, the country of their ancestors is the place where they feel at home, for others it is the USA. However, it is also possible that they find parts of their selves in both countries and the boundary between what is home and what is not are blurred. The question of belonging is especially complicated for immigrants who left their country in early childhood or as teenagers, the so-called *1.5 generation* (Tuon 1), and second-generation immigrants. Whereas the first generation of immigrants have a memory of the country they left, their children are only linked to it by what their parents recount or what they experience on short visits in their ancestral home.

5.2 Introduction of the novels

The analysis will include the following three novels: *Dreaming in Cuban* (1992) by Cristina García, *Monkey Bridge* (1997) by Lan Cao, and *The Namesake* (2003) by Jhumpa Lahiri.

5.2.1 Dreaming in Cuban (1992) by Cristina García

Dreaming in Cuban (DC) follows the lives of a diasporic Cuban family. The central figure is the grandmother Celia del Pino. Together with her late husband Jorge, she raised two daughters and one son. Lourdes, the eldest daughter, and her husband Rufino Puente migrate to New York after their estate has been confiscated by communist law. Lourdes a strong sense for entrepreneurship opens her own bakery. Her daughter Pilar is a rebellious teenager who, in contrast to her capitalist mother, has a socialist mind set and is a passionate painter and punk music fan.

At the opening of the novel a tree diagram of the del Pino family illustrates the relationship between the characters, already giving a hint of the importance of heritage and family ties in the novel. Thus, one can assume that the family tree not only serves the reader as an orientation, but also gives a picture of the family as a whole and reconnects the various members that are dispersed over the globe. The novel is divided into three parts, each of which is further subdivided into several chapters. Five of these chapters are a series of Celia's letters addressed to Gustavo, her Spanish lover. Moreover, there are separate captions within the chapters that indicate whose story is going to be told or the year in which the narrative takes place. The novel features a number of different perspectives: Celia del Pino's perspective in third-person narrative mode in seven chapters, and five series of letters (1935-1940, 1942-1949, 1950-1955, 1965-1958, 1989) in epistolary narrative voice, Pilar Puente's perspective told by herself as first-person narrator (eight chapters), and the perspectives of Lourdes Puente (seven chapters), Felicia del Pino (three chapters), Ivanito Villaverde (four chapters), Luz Villaverde (one chapter), and Herminia Delgado (one chapter), from third-person view. The narrative and the epistolary part follow a chronological order from past to present, however, separated from each other. The narrated time covers the years 1953-1959 in epistolary mode and the years 1972-1980 in present tense. The settings switch between the fictional town Santa Theresa del Mar, where Celia lives, and New York City, Lourdes' and Pilar's residence.

5.2.2 Monkey Bridge (1997) by Lan Cao

Monkey Bridge (MB) tells the story of Mai and her mother Thanh, two Vietnamese immigrants. Mai left already before her mother in 1975, having been taken in by Michael MacMahon an American GI and good friend of her father. After the fall of Saigon, Thanh had to follow her daughter and leave the country as well.

The story is set in New York in 1978, three years after their arrival in the USA. Mai's mother is in the hospital, recovering from a stroke leaving one side of her body paralysed. In her sleep she screams the name of her father who supposedly missed to meet her at the airport when she escaped Saigon and has never been heard of ever since. Mai makes it her mission to find out what happened to her grandfather.

The first-person, homodiegetic narrator of the story is Mai, who tells her story in retrospective, following a chronological order of events, which, however, is marked by

frequent time shifts into the deeper past, in the form of telling memories. At times, she appears to be piecing together spontaneous memories and streams of thoughts. The narrative is interrupted twice by the epistolary voice of Thanh. Thanh's manuscripts are printed in italic font and feature an entirely different style than the rest of the story. Thanh's homodiegetic narration is always in the present time of the telling, but shifts to the past to give an account of her mother's and her own life story.

5.2.3 The Namesake (2003) by Jhumpa Lahiri

The Namesake (TNS) tells the story of Gogol Ganguli, the American-born child of an Indian couple who immigrated to the US in 1968. The novel starts with Gogol's birth in a New England hospital and follows his life until he is thirty-two years old.

The central theme around which the story evolves is Gogol's rejection of the name his parents gave him. His struggle with coming to terms with his unfortunate name subliminally corrupts his life, even after he has decided to change it.

The novel gives not only insight into Gogol's coming-of-age as a second-generation Bengali, but also features parts of the lives of his parents, Ashima and Ashoke, his sister Sonia and his wife Moushumi who also experience identity issues, mostly stemming from their immigrant status.

TNS is consistent in its subjective third-person narrative mode with shifting foci on individual characters. The majority of the narrative focuses on Gogol. The novel is divided into twelve untitled chapters, with occasional indications of the year. The narrative sets off in 1968, Gogol's birth and ends in 2000 at his mother's farewell party, following a chronological order. The story is told in present tense, except for the last pages that are written in future tense. The geographical setting of novel is in the USA, shifting once to India and once, very shortly, to Paris.

6 Analysis

The analysis is focused on the aspects of identity that have been discussed in the previous chapter. In each of the novels these aspects become visible in different parts of the narrative. The fact that the authors find it important to write about these topics, proves that they are concerned with negotiating identity and try to point out the various ways that migration affects it.

6.1 Name

The meaning of names, the issue of the act of naming, and how this is connected to identity is brought up in all three novels. Most prominently, it is dealt with in NS. The cultural specificities in the handling of names in the respective cultures is addressed on many levels in the novels: the way how people are addressed, how names are chosen and how names can affect identity.

6.1.1 Customs of addressing people

MB shows how Mai is affected by the naming system in America that is different to the one she is used to. Other than in Western culture, in Vietnam, the family name stands before the individual name. Every time Mai is called by her full name in America, she is irritated by its “especially clumsy ring, an undertone of impermanence” (Cao 125). She refers to “Mai Nguyen” as opposed to the Vietnamese version of “Nguyen Mai” as her “American name”.

“Mai Nguyen,” I repeated to myself. [...]. It felt, in fact, like a borrowed name, on loan to satisfy my teachers’ insistence on rhyme and order. “Mai Nguyen” was my American name, or at least the American spin on my name. But it sounded unnatural. After all, tradition dictated that “Nguyen”, a family name, be granted pride of place, a position at the beginning. “Mai”, the individual name, should tag a few respectful steps behind. (Cao 125)

Moreover, there are no fixed pronouns like *I* or *you* in Vietnamese. The Vietnamese pronouns change depending on whether someone is speaking to their “mother, father, maternal or paternal grandparents, aunt, or uncle, and whether the aunt or uncle is from the mothers’ or father’s side” (Cao 144). This reflects the importance of roles attached to age, gender and family relation in Vietnamese culture. When someone, for example, is addressed as *aunt*

without being the person's actual aunt, this is a sign of respect, as Mai explains to the reader: "The 'aunt' used to address my mother signified great respect. It was reserved to address one's father's older sister, which meant my mother had been placed on an even higher plane than the speaker's father" (Cao 145).

TNS deals with the way relationships and form of address are interconnected in the Bengali culture. For example, husband and wife are not supposed to call each other by their names. Ashima never calls out Ashoke's name, neither when she speaks to him, nor when she speaks to others about him. "Ashima doesn't think of her husband's name when she thinks of her husband, even though she knows perfectly well what it is" (Lahiri 2). This has to do with the Bengali understanding of intimacy between married couples. "It's not the type of thing Bengali wives do. Like a kiss or caress in a Hindi movie, a husband's name is something intimate and therefore unspoken, cleverly patched over" (Lahiri 2). Instead, for Bengali women it is common to use an interrogative "which translates roughly as 'Are you listening to me?'" (Lahiri 2) to replace the husband's name.

In India, the relationship that a person has to another determines by what name one is supposed to address the other person. "There are endless names Gogol and Sonia must remember to say, not aunt this and uncle that but terms far more specific: masha and pishi, mama and maima, kaku and jethu, to signify whether they are related on their mother's or their father's side, by marriage or by blood" (Lahiri 81). Thus, according to the different roles a person can have, e.g. mother, wife, older sister, aunt, she has a matching number of matching names.

Moreover, every person has two names, a *pet name* and a *good name*. The former is used at home and among friends, the latter in formal situations. The good name is the name used in documents and at school. "Pet names are persistent remnant of childhood, a reminder that life is not always so serious, so formal, so complicated. They are a reminder, too, that one is not all things to all people", whereas "[g]ood names tend to represent dignified and enlightened qualities". (Lahiri 26)

A further character in TNS, Gogol's wife Moushumi Mazoomdar, follows an American custom and keeps her maiden name. The reason is that she is a published author, already known under this name. Her family, who is not used to this custom, automatically refers to her as Moushumi Ganguli after the wedding: "When relatives from India continue to address letters and cards to 'Mrs. Moushumi Ganguli,' she will shake her head and sigh" (Lahiri 227).

6.1.2 Names and their meanings

When parents choose the names for their children, they usually not do it randomly, but have a reason for coming up with a particular name.

Pilar, one of the protagonists in **DC**, for example, is named after the fishing boat in Hemingway's *The Old Man and the Sea* (García 220). This name fits the character, because just like a boat, she struggles with the sea which is separating her from Cuba and her grandmother. Pilar needs to travel across the ocean to fulfil her destiny. She is driven by an unknown force that steers her in different directions. Despite several storms that might make her lose course, she is headed in the right direction.

Also Celia is connected to the name of a boat, “the Granma, the American yacht El Líder took from Mexico to Cuba in 1956 on his second attempt to topple Batista”, which wrongly went down in history as *Grandma* (García 220) In the novel, Pilar points out how names are always related to history or even create history:

Some boat owner in Flordia misspells “Grandma” and look what happens: a myth is born, a province is renamed, a Communist party newspaper is launched. What if the boat had been called *Barbara Ann* or *Sweetie Pie* or *Daisy*? Would history be different? We're all tied to the past by flukes. (García 220)

Likewise, also in **MB**, names are indicative of their carriers' characteristics. Mai's mother is called *Thanh*, which means “bright, sunny, light or ‘ear pleasing’ sound or delicate, thing of high value” (see Vietnam and Vietnamese Culture). This name was given to her because she has extraordinary long ears. In Vietnamese culture, to have big ears means to be endowed with great power. All her life, Thanh defines herself over her special ears which, already at birth, were such significant features of her that she was named after them.

My ears, in fact, were an event so rare, so momentous, that the villagers, some holding strings of beads, others banging on drums, immediately hired fortune-tellers and astrologers, who reach deep into their starry vault to chart my life. That was why I was named Thanh, for the clarity and brilliance that my ears would bring to the family (Cao 52)

In **TNS**, the way of how the protagonist gets his name is highly significant for the whole novel. Gogol himself is named after Nikolai Gogol, the Russian author. The story how he

came to this name is a very conflicted one, as conflicted as the relationship Gogol will have to this name through all his life.

First of all, Gogol was meant to be a pet name, which should only temporarily substitute for the good name, which was thought to arrive in a letter by Ashima's grandmother. However, the letter never arrives and before they have the chance to ask Ashima's grandmother to send the name again, they learn that she had a stroke and is unable to talk. Unfortunately she has kept her choice of the names a secret and so, Ashoke and Ashima start to look for a good name themselves. They want to make a decision by the time Gogol receives a passport for the planned trip to India. However, they fly to India earlier as expected because Ashima's father dies from a heart attack. "[...] there is no time to think of a good name for Gogol. They get an express passport with 'Gogol Ganguli' typed across the United States of America seal, Ashoke signing on his son's behalf" (Lahiri 46). Also a second attempt to transform Gogol into a pet name and make another name into the good name fails. When Gogol starts elementary school, his father introduces him as *Nikhil*. Gogol, who is not used to this new name, refuses to listen to it, whereupon his teacher continues to call him Gogol (Lahiri 57).

Second, the reason why Ashoke chose the name, was his involvement in a train accident where he was almost killed and could only be saved because he was holding a page of Gogol's short story *The Overcoat* which he dropped when the rescuers were looking for survivors under the wreckage to attract their attention (Lahiri 18). This way, the effects of his trauma are passed on to his son. Also Ashima is aware that "the name stands not only for her son's life but also her husband's" (Lahiri 28).

Moreover, Nikolai Gogol, the provider of the name, was a depressive who suffered from "lifelong unhappiness", "mental instability" and "starved himself to death" at the age of thirty-three (Lahiri 100). Also *The Overcoat* features a main character, who is dogged by bad luck and dies poor and alone in the streets of St. Petersburg which he is doomed to wander, even after his death, as a ghost (cf. Gogol 177f.).

Gogol's sister is only given a good name, Sonali. Later she is simply called Sonia. "Sonia makes her a citizen of the world. It's a Russian link to her brother, it's European, South American. Eventually it will be the name of the Indian prime minister's Italian wife" (Lahiri 62). Also here, the name carries a symbolic meaning.

6.1.3 The name and the self

One of the most important thematic foci in **TNS** is how Gogol comes to terms with his “accidental” name. Ironically, as a child, Gogol does not want his name to be changed and refuses to listen to the good name his parents have chosen for him, *Nikhil*, the name he will later wish to have instead of strange *Gogol*. In Kindergarten he prevents the changing of his name, only to make up for it when he starts University.

His parents have spent a long time looking for the perfect good name for Gogol, just in time deciding on *Nikhil*: “The name is artfully connected to the old. Not only is it a perfectly respectable Bengali good name, meaning ‘he who is entire, encompassing all’, but also bears a satisfying resemblance to Nikolai, the first name of the Russian Gogol” (Lahiri 56). As well-chosen the name is, it is the reason “Gogol doesn’t want to go to kindergarten” (Lahiri 57), because of it. What for Ashoke and Ashima is important, to correct the mistake that happened at Gogol’s birth, feels terribly wrong to seven-year-old Gogol.

[...] Gogol doesn’t want a new name. He can’t understand why he has to answer to anything else.

“Why do I have to have a new name?” he asks his parents, tears springing to his eyes. It would be one thing if his parents were to call him *Nikhil*, too. But they tell him that the new name will be used only by the teachers and children at school. He is afraid to be *Nikhil*, someone he doesn’t know. Who doesn’t know him. His parents tell him that they each have two names, too, as do all their Bengali friends in America., and all their relatives in Calcutta. It’s a part of growing up, they tell him, part of being a Bengali. They write it for him on a sheet of paper, ask him to copy it over ten times.

“Don’t worry”, his father says. “To me and your mother you will never be anyone but Gogol.” (Lahiri 57)

The reason why Gogol refuses to listen to *Nikhil* is that he does not connect it to his identity. It is someone else’s name but not the one that denominates *him*. At this age he has not yet found out that Gogol is an inexistent name in English and Bengali, and even in Russian. Only later it occurs to him that

[t]his writer he is named after – Gogol isn’t his first name. His first name is Nikolai. Not only does Gogol Ganguli have a pet name turned good name, but a last name turned first name. [...] no one [...] in the world, in Russia or India or America or anywhere, shares his name. Nor even the source of his namesake. (Lahiri 78)

The only consequence of the rareness of his name has for him at this time is “substitute teachers at school always pause, looking apologetic when they arrive at his name on the

roster, forcing Gogol to call out, before even summoned, 'That's me,' and "that his name is never an option on key chains or metal pins or refrigerator magnets", which does not bother him (Lahiri 66).

In his early teens, however, Gogol is fully aware how strange his name is and is annoyed that he continuously is asked questions about his name. The oddness, however, does not dismay him as much as "the irrelevance of it all. Gogol, he's been tempted to tell his father on more than one occasion, was his father's favourite author, not his" (Lahiri 76).

He hates having to explain that it doesn't mean anything 'in Indian.' [...]. He hates that his name is both absurd and obscure, that it has nothing to do with who he is, that it is neither Indian nor American but of all things Russian. He hates having to live with it, with a pet name turned good name, day after day, second after second. (Lahiri 76)

The great extent to which Gogol is disturbed by his first name can be related to the fact that this name does not offer any possibility of identification for him. On the contrary, it carries the "traumatic and unsymbolized aspects intuited in [his] parents' experience of migration", causing "a reluctance or an impossibility, for [...] Gogol, to authorize a place in the world" (Munos 10). Gogol's unrelated first name is contrasted with his second name, which by its very nature relates him to his family and their homeland India, therefore not causing any confusion of his identity:

He remembers the astonishment of seeing six pages full of Gangulis, three columns to a page, in the Calcutta telephone directory. He'd wanted rip out the page as a souvenir, but when he'd told this to one of his cousins, the cousin had laughed. [...] He [his father] had told Gogol that Ganguli is a legacy of the British, and anglicised way of pronouncing his real surname, Gangopadhyay. (Lahiri 67)

The particularity of the kind of burden of carrying a name that he hates is that it is for life. "At times his name, an entity shapeless and weightless, manages nevertheless to distress him physically, like the scratchy tag of a shirt he has been forced permanently to wear. At times he wishes he could disguise it, shorten it somehow, the way the other Indian boy in his school" or "[l]ike his parents when they went to Calcutta" could "have an alternative identity, a B-side to the self" (Lahiri 76).

Gogol's problem with his name has negative effects on his social life. The name makes him feel insecure and limits him from living his life to the fullest, as for instance, he does not dare

to introduce himself to girls he likes fearing that they will laugh at him for his peculiar name. The first time he kisses a girl, he introduces himself as *Nikhil*, because he “doesn’t want to endure her reaction, to watch her lovely blue eyes grow wide” (Lahiri 96) when he tells her his name was Gogol. At this moment, he realises that his wish, that “there were another name he could use, just this once, to get him through the evening”, can be put into practice by not even having to lie, since there was another “name that had once been chosen for him, the one that should have been” (Lahiri 96).

Gogol is stunned at the major influence being *Nikhil* has on how the evening turned out. He is certain that “it hasn’t been Gogol who kissed Kim. [...] Gogol had had nothing to do with it” (Lahiri 96). Only through the feeling of protection “as if by an invisible shield” that the name *Nikhil* has given him the evening was made possible” (Lahiri 96). When Gogol graduates he finally makes the decision to permanently become *Nikhil* and officially changes his name, it makes him feel free and weightless, like “for an obese person to become thin, for a prisoner to walk free” (Lahiri 102).

Taking on a new name turns out to be a greater change that he had expected. It involves a complete reinvention of who he is, a new identity that he first has to get used to. He does not only have to try out his new signature - “[e]ventually he begins to practice his new signature in the margins of the paper. He tries it in various styles, his hand unaccustomed to the angles of the *N*, the dotting of the two *i*’s” (Lahiri 98) - but also his new life:

It is as *Nikhil*, that first semester that he grows a goatee, starts smoking Camel Lights at parties and while writing papers before exams, discovers Brian Eno and Elvis Castello and Charlie Parker. It is as *Nikhil* that he takes Metro-North into Manhattan one weekend with Jonathan and gets himself a fake ID that allows him to be served liquor in New Haven bars. It is as *Nikhil* that he loses his virginity at a party at Ezra Stiles, with a girl wearing a plaid woollen skirt and combat boots and mustard tights. (Lahiri 105)

The creation of a new self as *Nikhil*, however, does not extinguish his old self as Gogol. Gogol is still part of him, so that “[a]t times he feels as if he’s cast himself in a play, acting the part of twins, indistinguishable to the naked eye yet fundamentally different” (Lahiri 105). Moreover, he sees it as a “problem [...] that the people who know him as *Nikhil* have no idea that he used to be Gogol. They know him only in the present, not at all in the past” (Lahiri 105). However, he also is troubled by the people who did know him as Gogol, like his parents, who now call him *Nikhil*, “making him feel in that instant that he is not related to

them, not their child” (Lahiri 106). Gogol has to accept that he now is split between two names and two identities. When he comes to visit his parents every other weekend, he turns into Gogol again. “Somewhere along the two-and-a-half-hour journey, Nikhil evaporates and Gogol claims him again” (Lahiri 106).

6.2 Occupation/education/special skills

A big part of people’s identity is constituted by what they *do*. Whether being a student or an employee, what we occupy ourselves with, influences who we are. On the one hand, hobbies, work or studying or can function as a kind of therapy and are driven by a strong, intrinsic need to exercise them. On the other hand, the motivation can be extrinsic, providing an opportunity to increase one’s social status.

6.2.1 Occupation or hobbies as self-realisations or therapy

In **DC**, art and music are very prominent parts in Pilar’s and Celia’s life. Pilar is a painter. Her paintings mirror not only her feelings, but also her attitude. “My paintings have been getting more and more abstract lately, violent-looking with clotted swirls of red. Mom thinks they’re morbid” (García 29). When Pilar repeatedly is suspended from Catholic private school, she is sent to a psychiatrist. Also the psychiatrist reads her paintings as an expression of her soul, believing that she has an “urge to mutilate the human form” (García 59).

Indeed, much of what she expresses in her art are negative feelings, such as anger toward her mother and despair over the fact that she cannot be with her grandmother and instead is forced to live in a family in a country where she feels that she does not belong. In contrast to her mother’s and the psychiatrist’s opinion, she considers expressing this negativity on paper as healthy and constructive. “What could I say? [...] that a paintbrush is better than a gun so why doesn’t everybody just leave me alone? Painting is its own language, I wanted to tell him.” (García 59). Her art, for Pilar, indeed, is like a second language that she uses to express very strong emotions that are released spontaneously and make actual words unnecessary. For that reason, she refuses to title her pictures and uses numbers instead. “I mean, who needs words when colors and lines conjure up their own language? That’s what I want to do with my paintings, find a unique language, obliterate clichés” (García 139).

The same energy and strength which she receives from painting she also finds in music. Not only does she love to listen to her records and goes to concerts, she also makes music herself.

Already the first time she plays her bass, she experiences an almost ecstatic indulgence: “The thick strings vibrate through my fingers, up my arms, down my chest. I don’t know what I’m doing but I start thumping that old spruce dresser of an instrument for all it’s worth, thumping and thumping, until I feel my life begin” (García 181).

Also when she paints, she makes use of the power music has on her. She listens to music that corresponds to her mood and the energy she wants to capture in the painting.

I play Lou [Reed] and Iggy Pop and this new band the Ramones whenever I paint. I love their energy, their violence, their incredible grinding guitars. It’s like an artistic form of assault. I try to translate what I hear into colors and volumes and lines that confront people, that say, “Hey, we’re here too and what we think matters!” or more often just “Fuck you!” (García 135)

This shows how invested Pilar is in the process of painting. For her, art is not just about the finished piece, but the process of creating it.

An example of how Pilar uses art as political statement is when her mother asks her to paint a patriotic mural for her bakery (García 138). The painting is a way to rebel against her mother and her patriotism. Whereas on the one hand, art usually splits Pilar and her mother, in the scene of the unveiling of the painting in the bakery, it reconnects them. Lourdes who has shown a surprising confidence and believe in Pilar’s artistic skill, which her daughter abuses by painting a punk-version of the statue of liberty, her mother’s requested motive. In spite of the fact that Lourdes must be furious over her daughter’s prank she defends her and the painting against the audience’s aggressive way to show their depreciation.

A lumpish man charges Liberty with a pocketknife, repeating his words like a war cry. Before anyone can react, Mom swings her new handbag and clubs the guy cold inches from the painting. Then, as if in slow motion, she tumbles forwards, a thrashing avalanche of patriotism and motherhood, crushing three spectators and a table of apple tartlets.

And I, I love my mother very much at that moment. (García 144)

Also in other scenes, Lourdes finds a connection to Pilar in the things that represent her as an artist: When Pilar runs away, Lourdes sits down in her room and “scoops up an armful of Pilar’s grubby overalls and her paint-spattered flannel shirts and lies beneath them on her daughter’s bed. She inhales the turpentine, the smell of defiance that is Pilar” (García 23).

When Pilar is at college, every night Lourdes stands in front of the painting, examining it and thinking of her daughter” (García 171). This shows how much of Pilar is present in her art.

Whereas for Pilar, art and music are ways to make reality more poignant, for Celia they are a way of escaping reality. In her times of psychical illness and disconnection from reality, she finds energy in playing the piano. Most of all, she enjoys playing pieces by Debussy. She has to do this secretly, because her husband does not allow her to. The doctors have warned him that it would affect her mental condition negatively: “They feared that the Frenchman’s restless style might compel her to rashness, but Celia hid her music to *La Soirée dans Grenade* and played it incessantly while Jorge travelled” (García 8). She also is fond of poems by Federico García Lorca, many of which she knows by heart and likes to recite “quite dramatically” (García 235). Parts of Lorca’s poems are inserted into the narrative: *Paisaje* (94) and *Por las Ramas del Laurel* (109), *Gacela de la Huida* (156/7). This intertextual device is a means to emphasise the melancholy mood that Celia is in when reciting the poems. Before Celia dies, she passes her poetry collection on to Pilar.

When Pilar is visiting Cuba and offers to make a painting of her grandmother, Celia uses this opportunity to have an adjusted image of her real self created: ““So tell me how you want to be remembered,”” Pilar asks her, ““I can paint you any way you like”” (García 232). Intrigued by the offer, Celia tells Pilar to paint a young and happy version of her, how she likes to envision herself. “In a few sketches, I paint Abuela Celia just the way she wants – dancing flamenco with whirling red skirts and castanets and a tight satin bodice. Abuela likes these paintings best, and even ventures a few suggestions “Can’t you make my hair a little darker, Pilar? My waist a little more slender?”” (García 232).

When Jorge dies, Celia looks for something to occupy herself with. She decides to dedicate her life to El Líder³ and engages in several voluntary activities. She helps at construction sites and cutting sugar cane. In addition, she volunteers to be the civilian judge of her commune. Celia’s work as a judge gives her life new meaning, a higher purpose. She sees her work as “a change to participate in something larger than herself” (García 117).

Celia is pleased. What she decides makes a difference in other’s lives, and she feels part of a great historical unfolding. What would have been expected of her twenty years ago? To sway endlessly on her wicker swing, old before her time? To baby-sit her grand-children and wait for death? (García 111)

³ “The leader”, term used in DC to refer to Fidel Castro

However, despite all her activities and commitment to El Líder, she sometimes feels lonely. “Not the loneliness of previous years, of a reluctant life by the sea, but a loneliness born of the inability to share her joy” (García 119). In those moments she wishes Pilar were by her side.

Lourdes has an entirely different relationship to art than Pilar or Celia. To her, it is a waste of time and does not provide any sense of self-satisfaction. In her opinion, only work is really suitable to increase one’s contentedness. She uses work as a remedy for all her doubts and insecurities. For example, when she sees apparitions of her father, she makes extra shifts in the bakery for distraction. Hard work restores her self-confidence and gives her the feeling of control. She is good at what she does in the bakery. Also, she is very invested in training her staff. The bakery is *her* world where *she* has the say.

Business picks up after five o’clock with the after-work crowd stopping by for desserts. Mirabel works efficiently, tying the boxes of pastries firmly with string just as she was taught. This pleases Lourdes. By now, she has almost dispelled the effect of her father’s visitation yesterday. Could she have imagined the entire incident? (García 67)

Also in her free time, Lourdes chooses to spend her time in a controlling position. She volunteers as an auxiliary policewoman in the district. This job is a perfect incarnation of also her private identity. Also in her private life, she wears uniform-like outfits, regards it as her obligation to keep things in order, watches over people and tells them what to do. No wonder, that she is an excellent policewoman: “Captain Cacciola congratulated her personally. He wanted to make sure she was tough enough on crime. Lourdes said she believed drug dealers should die in the electric chair. This pleases the captain [...]” (García 127). Lourdes enjoys being on parole, to have the feeling of power and control.

TNS’s protagonist Gogol is especially interested and gifted in drawing (Lahiri 60). Already at an early age, he discovers the joy in capturing what he sees in a drawing. In contrast to Pilar, it is less a means of expressing emotions, than a way of observation and reconstruction of reality. When Gogol draws things, he is able to see them from a unique perspective. He has a way of noticing small details that make things special. Especially, when he travels, he likes to sketch the scenery and buildings. “He sketches what he sees” (Lahiri 83). In Calcutta “the crooked skyline, the courtyards, the cobblestone square where he watches maids filling brass urns at the tube well, people passing under the soiled canopies of rickshaws, hurrying home with parcels in the train” (Lahiri 83), in Paris “[h]e sits on a bench and sketches the town

houses in the Place des Vosges” (Lahiri 232), in Venice “[h]e lost himself among the darkened narrow streets, crossing countless tiny bridges, discovering deserted squares, where he sat with a Campari or a coffee, sketching the facades of pink and green palaces and churches, unable ever to retrace his steps” (Lahiri 283).

It was thanks to his art class that he made an important discovery for his identity formation. On a fieldtrip, they go to the cemetery to make frottages of the inscriptions on the gravestones. Whereas all the other children find gravestones with their names on it, Gogol, even without searching, knows that there is no gravestone of someone called Gogol or Ganguli: “Gogol is old enough to know that there is no Ganguli here. He is old enough to know that he himself will be burned, not buried, that his body will occupy no plot of earth, that no stone in this country will bear his name beyond life” (Lahiri 69). However, Gogol stumbles upon a grave with a name that is not his, but shares its peculiarity: “ABIJAH CRAVEN, 1701-45. Gogol has never met a person named Abijah, just as he now realizes, he never met another Gogol” (Lahiri 69/70). As he walks further he finds more tombstones with untypical names, like PEREGRIN WOTTON or EZIEKEL and URIAH LOCKWOOD, feeling strangely connected to these names: “He likes their oddness, their flamboyance. [...] Gogol is attached to them. For reasons he cannot explain or necessarily understand, these ancient Puritan spirits, these very first immigrants to America, these bearers of unthinkable, obsolete names, have spoken to him, [...]” (Lahiri 70/1). On the one hand, Gogol makes the painful experience that he is different from the majority of his classmates who come from a long line of American families. On the other hand, he realises at the same time that also as an immigrant he has a history, not only a personal one, but also a collective one he shares with all other immigrants who have similar “odd” names like him.

Ashoke chooses to study engineering, although his real passion are books.

Since childhood he has had the habit and the ability to read while walking, holding a book in one hand on his way to school, from room to room in his parents’ three-story house in Alipore, and up and down the red clay stairs. Nothing roused him. Nothing distracted him. Nothing caused him to stumble. As a teenager he had gone through all of Dickens. He read newer authors as well, Graham Greene and Somerset Maugham, all purchased from his favourite stall on College Street with pujo money. (Lahiri 12)

Most of all, Ashoke likes to read Russian authors. His grandfather, a literature professor, inspired him to read their novels. The reading is crucial for Ashoke’s life on several levels. First, through English books he started to get accustomed to the language, which is essential

for the high level of proficiency in English he needs to enrol in an American university: “His paternal grandfather, a former professor of European literature at Calcutta University, had read from them aloud in English translations when Ashoke was a boy. [...] When Ashoke’s English was good enough, he began to read the books himself” (Lahiri 12).

Second, it is his affection of books that saves his life in the train wreck and as a consequence his favourite author becomes his son’s namesake. The fact that the page of a book ultimately saved his life, is quite the opposite of what his mother predicted, “that her eldest son would be hit by a bus or a tram, his nose deep into *War and Peace*. That he would be reading a book the moment he died” (Lahiri 13).

Through its relevance in the Ashoke’s rescue from the train wreck, the book of Nikolai Gogol’s collected short stories, takes on a symbolic meaning. It has particular value because it is handed on from one generation to the next. Ashoke inherits his grandfather’s edition, which gets destroyed in the train crash, and Ashoke gives another addition to Gogol.

He carried a single volume for the journey, a hardbound collection of short stories by Nikolai Gogol, which his grandfather had given him when he’d graduated from class twelve. On the title page, beneath is grandfather’s signature, Ashoke had written his own. Because of Ashoke’s passion, the spine had recently split, threatening to divide the pages into two sections” (Lahiri 13)

Later, looking at editions of Nikolai Gogol’s books in the library provides Ashoke with comfort: “He browses in the aisles, gravitation most often toward his beloved Russians, where he is particularly comforted, each time, by his son’s name stamped in golden letters on the spines of a row of red and green and blue hardbound books” (Lahiri 49).

For Gogol, the opposite is true. He tries to avoid any contact with any of Nikolai Gogol’s books. He does not act on his father’s suggestion to read something by the author. When he gets Gogol’s collected short stories as a birthday present, he quickly places it in his bookshelf where it stays untouched (Lahiri 75). Even when Gogol is supposed to read *The Overcoat* for his literature class, he refuses to do so.

Gogol says nothing. He has not read the story himself. He has never touched the Gogol book his father gave him on his fourteenth birthday. And yesterday, after class, he’d shoved the short story anthology deep into his locker, refusing to bring it home. To read the story, he believes, would mean paying tribute to his namesake, accepting it somehow. (Lahiri 92)

Only years later, when Gogol is thirty-two years old and clears out old things from his childhood and finds the book he received from his father at his fourteenth birthday, he starts to read it. Just like Ashoke's edition by his grandfather, Lahiri describes the physical shape of Gogol's book with affectionate attention to detail, indicating again its symbolic meaning.

And then another book, never read, long forgotten, catches his eye. The jacket is missing, the title on the spine practically faded. It's a thick clothbound volume topped with decades-old dust. The ivory pages are heavy, slightly sour, silken to the touch. The spine cracks faintly when he opens it to the title page. *The Short Stories of Nikolai Gogol*. "For Gogol Ganguli," it says on the front endpaper in his father's tranquil hand, in red ballpoint ink, the letters rising gradually, optimistically, on the diagonal toward the upper right-hand corner of the page. "The man who gave you his name, from the man who gave you your name" is written within quotation marks. Underneath the inscription, which he has never before seen, is his birthday, and the year, 1982. (288)

6.2.2 Education and occupation as vehicle for social or personal opportunity

In **DC**, Lourdes defines herself via her job. The fact, that she, as a woman is the breadwinner in the family, makes her proud and gives her self-consciousness. "Cuban women of a certain age and a certain class consider working outside the home to be beneath them. But Lourdes never believed that" (García 130). She never accepts the life that is designated for her as a Puente woman. Right after marrying into the Puente family, she started working on the ranch. Her understanding of power is different from that of her husband's family. For her, only work, and the not status, give significance. In America, this attitude is very successful. Lourdes is able to open a second bakery in New York. She distinguishes herself from the other Puente women who still behaved in the way their status in Cuba implied. "Even now, stripped of their opulence, crowded into a two-bed apartment in Hialeah and Little Havana, the Puente women clung to their rituals as they did to their engraved silverware, succumbing to a clinging nostalgia" (García 130). Her big dream is to open bakeries all across the country.

She envisioned a chain of Yankee Doodle bakeries stretching across America to St. Louis, Dallas, Los Angeles, her apple pies and cupcakes on main streets and in suburban shopping malls, everywhere.

Each store would bear her name, her legacy: **LOURDES PUENTE, PROPRIETOR**. (García 171)

MB deals with education as a vehicle to a better life. For Mai, education is empowerment. It gives her the opportunity to start a new life and to get away from her mother, whose

depression is withholding her from moving on from the past. Having to be responsible for her mother obstructs Mai from taking her own path in life.

Mai is accepted into the university, although she suspects that the interviewer at the admission's office is not only impressed by her excellent academic performance, but also by the exoticism Mai represents for her. The first question she is asked in the interview was whether she was from Vietnam, for Mai "the one question that always numbed me to the nuances of normal conversation" (Cao 125). The interviewer continues to ask about details about her immigration experience.

She cleared her throat. "It must have been very difficult. You've done a remarkable job adjusting," she declared.

I whispered a quick thank you. What did this woman expect as a response? Can we start the interview over? I wanted to plead. [...] This must be her idea of exchanging social pleasantries. Instead of the preliminaries like "What a nice skirt you've got" or "What a rotten day it is outside," I was getting this kind of searing chitchat before the interview could officially begin. (Cao 127)

Whereas for Mai, the migration opens up new possibilities with regards to social rise, for her mother Thanh, it meant a social decline. In Vietnam, she was used to belonging to the educated social strata, since she had the privilege to go to a French private school and was married to a professor. In America, her influence and with it, her dignity, are lost. While "her identity was that of a professor's wife" (Cao 145), she has to work in a Vietnamese grocery store, managing and cleaning the vegetable supply. Within the exile community, however, she still is respected. In Little Saigon, it does not matter what one was in US, but what one used to be in Vietnam. According to Thanh, education provides a "movable life" (Cao 132). No matter how disappointing their life, education would allow "that they could always take this world, the unminiaturized world of their education, with them, wherever they went. [...] no one, not only war, could ever take that away" (Cao 132).

TNS, as well, deals with education and career as an indicator of personal and social achievement. For Ashoke, his work ranks high among the things that matter most in his life. His career is the prior factor in making life decisions. Above all, his decision to go abroad had the purpose to pursue his career. For that matter, his criterion for choosing a wife is that she is willing to go abroad with him. Also within the US, the family moves wherever Ashoke gets a new position.

Considering where he started off, it is a big achievement for Ashoke to get the position of a professor at a university. The success of having reached his goal to make it in America, makes very him proud.

The job is everything Ashoke has ever dreamed of. He has always hoped to teach in a university rather than work for a corporation. What a thrill, he thinks, to stand lecturing before a roomful of American students. What a sense of accomplishment it gives him to see his name printed under “Faculty” in the university directory. What joy each time Mrs. Jones says to him, “Professor Ganguli, your wife is on the phone.” (Lahiri 49)

Whereas for Ashoke, work life is what serves most in building his identity, Ashima, as a house wife, suffers under a lack of this source of self-definition. For her, it is difficult to feel purposeful and self-confident in new places. Other than to her husband, the US is not a site of fulfilment of dreams. Whereas in India, it would be legitimate for her as woman to be a mother, daughter, aunt and wife, in America this is too little.

The Ganguli’s have moved to a university town outside Boston. [...] Ashoke has been hired as an assistant professor of electrical engineering at the university. [...] For Ashima, migrating to the suburbs feels more drastic, more distressing than the move from Calcutta to Cambridge had been. She wishes Ashoke had accepted the position at Northeastern so that they could have stayed in the city. (Lahiri 49)

Being unemployed is a constant strain on Ashima’s self-confidence. The absence of a routine and a place of belonging and purpose, burdens her every day. The fact that she does not work and instead has to take care of Gogol, limits her life considerably: “Her forays out of the apartments, while her husband is at work, are limited to the university within which they live, and to the historic district that flanks the campus on the edge” (Lahiri 50). Moreover, since she is not interlaced in any community, she struggles with loneliness. “For the hours that Gogol is at nursery school, finger-painting and learning the English alphabet, Ashima is despondent, unaccustomed, all over again, to being on her own” (Lahiri 50).

6.3 Relationships

The relationships that are discussed in the novels are mostly focussed on the tension between the different generations of immigrants. However, all three novels deal with different aspects of conflicts of parent-child relationships.

6.3.1 Inherited generational conflict

DC centres on the complicated relationship of three generations of women: Second-generation immigrant Pilar Puente, mother Lourdes Puente, and her grandmother Celia del Pino who lives in Cuba. The text highlights “the questions of identification with and differentiation from the mother, emphasizing a need for understanding and bonding between mothers and daughters as a fundamental step toward self-awareness and mastery of culture” (Davis 60).

Pilar and Lourdes are like fire and ice, repeating the conflict between Lourdes and her mother who also have significantly diverging personalities. The troubled relationship between Celia and Lourdes has its origin already at Lourdes birth or even earlier. The reason why Celia cannot accept her child is that she unconsciously blames it for keeping her from leaving her husband and follow her real love Gustavo to Spain. “Celia wished for a boy, a son who could make his way in the world: If she had a son, she would leave Jorge and sail to Spain, to Granada” (García 42). However, it turns out that her first-born is a girl, forcing her to keep her promise to stay with Jorge: “If she had a girl, Celia decided she would stay. She would not abandon a daughter to this life, but train her to read the columns of blood and numbers in men’s eyes, to understand the morphology of survival” (García 42). However noble Celia’s intentions to protect her daughter are, they mark the beginning of the life-long conflict between them.

After Lourdes’ birth and her realisation that her most desperate dream, to be with the man she loves, will never be fulfilled, Celia slides into a severe depression and is sent to an asylum.

In her final dialogue with her husband, before he took her to the asylum, Celia talked about how the baby had no shadow, how the earth in its hunger had consumed it. She held their baby by one leg, handed her to Jorge, and said, “I will not remember her name” (García 43).

Lourdes’ knowledge about being abandoned by her own mother, results in deep resentment. She even traces her own inability to love her daughter back to the very moment her mother rejected her. “If it’s true that babies learn love from their mothers’ voices, then this is what Lourdes heard: ‘I will not remember her name’” (García 74). Therefore, the generational opposition between mother and daughter is repeated also in the next generation.

Lourdes finally “abandons her mother and her motherland, physically and emotionally” (Davis 62) by leaving Cuba and starting over in a new country, the same desire Pilar develops in her early teens.

Our house is on a cement plot near the East River. At night, especially in the summer when the sound carries, I [Pilar] hear the low whistles of the ships as they leave New York harbor. They travel south past the Wall Street skyscrapers, past Ellis Island and the Statue of Liberty, past Bayonne, New Jersey, and the Bay Ridge Channel and under the Verrazano Bridge. Then they make a left at Coney Island and head out to the Atlantic. When I hear those whistles, I want to go with them. (García 30/1)

Somehow, she thinks that her life would be much easier, if she could live with her grandmother Celia to whom she feels much more connected than to her mother. At thirteen (García 31), she attempts to run off to Cuba. Her journey ends, however, in Miami, where she is sent back by her relatives where she planned to hide for the night. Pilar’s run-away-plan comes off as a little bit childish. The attempt to go to Cuba is more like a cry for attention and a symbolic gesture of rebellion against her mother, than a realistic plan to travel to Cuba.

Even though she does not succeed in distancing herself from her mother physically, she does emotionally. Pilar openly rebels against her mother, transgressing every rule she sets up. Lourdes opposes “the American way” (García 58) children are raised. Her educational stance demands self-discipline and respect of the eldest. The harsh disciplinary measures of her mother, however, do not affect Pilar. Lourdes regularly oversteps Pilar’s privacy, “[m]y mother reads my diaries [...]. She says it’s her responsibility to read my private thoughts”, attacks her physically, “she beat me in the face and pulled my hair out in big clumps” and restricts her freedom by forcing Pilar “to work in her bakery every day after school for twenty-five cents an hour” (García 26), making her take down her Jimi Hendrix poster (García 23) and wants to keep her from pursuing her dream to become an artist by trying to force her to turn down the art scholarship she won (García 29). In Lourdes opinion, artists “are a bad element, a profligate bunch who shoot heroin” (García 29).

Pilar, however, does not respond to Lourdes’ torment and continues to follow her own will. Her way to deal with the situation is to show indifference and mock her mother, instead of showing her respect.

Pilar was ten years old and already mocking everything. Lourdes slapped her for being disrespectful, but it made no difference on her daughter. Pilar was immune to threats.

She placed no value on normal things so it was impossible to punish her. Even now, Pilar is not afraid of pain or of losing anything. (García 128)

In reality, however, Pilar suffers immensely under her mother's tyrannical regiment. She finds consolation in the imaginary conversations with her grandmother.

I might be afraid of her [Lourdes] if it weren't for those talks I have with Abuela Celia late at night. She tells me that my mother is sad inside and that her anger is more frustration at what she can't change. Still, Mom can get pretty violent. In her hands, bedroom slippers are lethal weapons. (García 63)

As much Lourdes and Celia detest each other, Pilar and Celia treasure each other. Celia is the female attachment figure Pilar lacks to see in her mother. For advice she turns to her grandmother and converses with her telepathically: Celia "closes her eyes and speaks to her granddaughter, imagines her words as silvers of light piercing the murky night" (García 7). The words cross the Atlantic and miraculously reach Pilar: "I hear her speaking to me at night just before I fall asleep. [...] She tells me she loves me" (García 29). Celia's connection to Pilar is so strong that she even can contact her through her dreams: "I have this image of Abuela Celia underwater, standing on a reef with tiny chrome fish darting by her face like flashes of light. [...] She calls to me but I can't hear her. Is she talking to me from her dreams?" (García 220).

Many times, Pilar feels somehow incomplete and believes that her grandmother and Cuba are missing parts from her life. Pilar thinks that the fact that Lourdes and not Celia is her mother must be an irony of fate: "I wonder how mom could be Abuela Celia's daughter. And what I'm doing as my mother's daughter. Something got horribly scrambled along the way" (García 178). Lourdes feels the same kind of disconnection and estrangement to Pilar, the girl that "looks nothing like her daughter. Lourdes can no longer envision Pilar, only floating parts of her. An amber eye, a delicate wrist with a silver-and-turquoise bracelet, eyebrows arched and think as if inviting danger" (García 23).

Despite the differences between mothers and daughters, they also acknowledge the connections and similarities between them. For instance, Celia and Lourdes are both invested in keeping up law and order, Celia as a civilian judge of her neighbourhood and her daughter as an auxiliary policewoman. Lourdes and Pilar share their fearlessness to be open about their

opinions: “If I don’t like someone, I show it. It’s the one thing I have in common with my mother” (García 135).

As the novels’ end reveals, it is necessary for the daughters to look back on the histories of their mothers to complete their process of self-identification. As Davis points out “the process of discovery [...] of the daughter’s own identity demands a revision of the relationship with the mother” (61), referring to a theory by Lorna Irvine who states that this

often involves three stages: negotiation, recognition, and reconciliation (248). The need to go “back to the future” implies the urgency of appropriating the intricate truths about one’s self and history as part of the process of self-affirmation. The immigrant characters in García’s novel – Lourdes and Pilar – need to return to Cuba in order to come to terms with the tangled meanings of mothering [...].

The antithesis to the conflicted mother-daughter relationships is the much closer bond between the fathers and daughters in the novel. While Lourdes never is able to build an emotional connection to her mother who rejected her as baby, she does to her father. Celia is aware that Lourdes “still punishes me for the early years” (García 163). She cannot help but admit that “[t]his girl is a stranger to me. When I approach her, she turns numb, as if she wanted to be dead in my presence” (García 163). She envies Jorge when she “see[s] how different Lourdes is with her father, so alive and gay, and it hurts me, but I don’t know what to do” (García 163). Even with Jorge’s death, their connection does not end. Lourdes is visited by Jorge’s ghost for months after he deceased; seemingly not ready to let him go yet. On her way home from the bakery, they discuss one of their common interests, for example politics or baseball, or they talk about Lourdes’ troubles with the bakery or with Pilar. “Lourdes is herself only with her father. Even after his death, they understand each other perfectly, as they always have” (García 131).

Similarly, Pilar has a much better relationship to her father than to her mother. She always takes his side, and he always hers. When Lourdes, for instance, forbids her to go to art school, it is Rufino who “in his unobtrusive way, finally persuaded her to let me go” (García 29).

The “disconnection between mothers and daughters” also “finds a foil in the bond between mothers and sons” (Davis 63). The bond Celia fails to establish to either of her daughters, she has with her son Javier. Her heart breaks when Javier, whose political opinion is not tolerated by Jorge, secretly and without saying goodbye leaves his parents’ house and moves to Czechoslovakia. In the beginning, Celia and Javier keep contact, but the letters by Javier

become infrequent and of less substance (García 118/9). After having lost her own son, Celia later establishes a close relationship with her grandson Ivanito whose own mother is unable to take care of him. Lourdes has fantasies about her miscarried son, being sure that her relationship to him would be exactly opposite to the one she shares with her daughter.

Her son would have been different. He wouldn't have talked back to her or taken drugs or drink beer from paper bags like the other teenagers. Her son would have helped her in the bakery without complaint. He would have come to her for guidance, pressed her hand to his cheek, told her he loved her. Lourdes would have talked to her son the way Rufino talks to Pilar, for companionship. Lourdes suffers with this knowledge. (García 129)

On their trip to Cuba, Lourdes grows fond of her nephew Ivanito. She becomes his guardian and helps him to escape from Cuba, which tragically adds to Celia's decision to commit suicide.

6.3.2 Reversal of parents' and children's roles

MB deals with the role reversal of first-generation immigrant parents and their second – or 1.5 generation children. The parents may still uphold their authority over their children within the homes, but in the public world, they are clumsy and unskilful. When it comes to manage American daily life, the children have to step in as the adults and have to carry all the responsibility. Mai is soon aware of the “dreadful truth” that

we were going through life in reverse, and I was the one who would help my mother through the hard scrutiny of ordinary suburban life. I would have to forgo the luxury of adolescent experiments and temper tantrums, so that I could scoop my mother out of harm's way and give her sanctuary. Now, when we stepped into the exterior world, I was the one who told my mother what was acceptable or unacceptable behaviour. (Cao 35)

Although Mai is shocked by the way her mother suddenly loses - or gives up - the autonomy of being a grown person. However, she is consoled knowing that “[a]ll children of immigrant parents have experienced these moments. When it first occurs, when the parent first reveals the behaviour of a child, is a defining moment” (Cao 35).

Mai soon realises that, due to her mother's anxieties stemming from her traumatic experiences in Vietnam, she has to help her not only with the real world's challenges of being in a foreign country, but also guard her from threats that lurk in her imaginary world. Thanh believes she

has to protect her daughter from the “infinite, untouchable forces that made up the hidden universe: hexes and courses, destiny and karma” (Cao 25) her mother believed in. However this way of protection is not helpful in America, where instead of the ghosts of the past, the power of the individual and the possibility of self-determination prevail. Karma, after all, is “the antithesis of Manifest Destiny” (Cao 156), the spirit that rules in America.

Although Mai notices her mother’s obsession to be with her “all the time, to deflect their powers, since I was too ignorant to detect danger myself” (Cao 24), she knows that it was actually “the other way around, when you get right down to it. I should have been the one to fear for my mother’s safety, for her fragile sanity. At any moment, it was as if she could close her eyes and summon, from the murky darkness of her mind, a world only she could see” (Cao 24/5).

Mai is not pleased with the situation of having to parent her own mother and wants to leave for college in order “to flee from a phantom world that could no longer offer comfort or sanctuary” (Cao 32). When she is planning to contact her grandfather Baba Quan and convince him to come to Virginia, she thinks about the relieve this would mean for her, because then “[h]e could step in and take care of her [Thanh], and I could leave home for college with the reassurance that she would not be – would not feel – abandoned” (Cao 17).

Thanh senses that Mai would be glad to turn her back on her mother and her Confucian beliefs. She is hurt and disappointed that her daughter does not believe in the same spirits as she does. In her journals, she writes that Mai “talks to me as if I make no sense. Not so loud, Mom, she whispers. Everything that smells of life before, my daughter thinks she can scour clean. She has disengaged and unremembered so swiftly something as big as a life, disassembling it from her mind as if it had never been” (Cao 53). Mai on the other hand, is hurt that her “mother had already begun to see me, even as early as our first year in Virginia, as somebody volatile and unreliable, an outsider with inside information” (Cao 41).

Mai is caught in a difficult struggle to “differentiate herself from a mother who represents the old life and the obstacles it erects to assimilation” (Cao 146). Thanh has a clever “new strategy for our battles in America, deftly turning our differences into a war of East and West” (Cao 61).

In Vietnam, the saying used to be ‘Parents point, children sit.’ In this country, it’s become ‘Children point, parents sit.’ [...] she was returning to her usual stoic whispers, her resigned, seemingly indifferent comments that meant the opposite of

what they seemed. And I in turn cleared my throat and cast my eyes downward, away from hers. We were engaged in a shadow play that had acquired a life of its own – a reluctant elegance – her stoicism and my guilt. (Cao 60)

Thanh who normally avoids talking about feelings, once, when she is still in the hospital and in a very weak state, turns to her daughter and asks her “Do you love me? [...] clutching my finger like a baby as I fed her a bowl of tamarind soup after her physical therapy” (Cao 137). Even when Mai assures her mother to be taking care of her, she still seems to be offended: “My mother looked away, then nodded. And I knew what she was thinking: Why did it have to take something like this for you to pay me any attention at all?” (Cao 137). Making her daughter feel guilty, Thanh makes it very difficult for Mai to emancipate and concentrate on her life and future. Mai tries hard to be there for her mother, for example, she decides “to relinquish an array of after-school obligations to devote myself to her care” (Cao 138), but Thanh increasingly withdraws from the world, each time having to “struggle to move back into the world of the living” (Cao 139). Mai grows more and more alienated, for “[t]here was no way [...] to check for clues [of her feelings], because my mother would inevitably turn bonelessly unreadable and absolutely neutral” (Cao 139). Every day she asks her mother how she feels, without receiving any response.

A sense of distance and remoteness had attached to her body and it was at moments like those that I understood the true meaning of absence. My days were threaded with an ongoing fear that translated into a hollow sense of remove as well, remove from everything, except my mother’s health. (Cao 134)

The root of the problems between Thanh and Mai are that they are unable to communicate. The tension that grows between them is never released. Thanh, whose actions are subtle and unobtrusive, lacks the ability to openly address her emotions. Instead she writes into her diary. The truth, held by the journal, is the missing link for an understanding between mother and daughter. It contains Thanh’s secrets and feelings that she tries so hard to keep away from her daughter in order to protect her. Also the very act of writing the journal happens in hiding. Just as with the other secrets her mother keeps, Mai only accidentally stumbles over clues insinuating that there is more to the story of Baba Quan: “Once or twice, when I happened upon her in the middle of the night, I’d caught her off guard, half asleep, with her papers spilling from her arms” (Cao 46). She assumes that her mother would throw them away, but one day, she finds them while gathering some clothes to bring her mother in hospital. Reading

journals, Mai starts to sense the complexity and “moral wilderness” of her mother’s past “that is at once her own and her country’s” (Cowart 155). The estrangement between Mai and the content of the journals is indicated already by the way Mai describes the shapes of the letters: “Its muscular letters, erect and vertical, marched across the creased pages in a formal, authoritative Vietnamese I could still read and understand but could not, at this point, write myself. I took a deep gulp of air and watched myself contemplate the possibility of touching, actually touching, this untouchable part of my mother’s night life” (Cao 46). Cowart, moreover, states that

[p]art of the genius of introducing the mother’s journals and correspondence into the text is that, rather than the stereotype of the aged, dark-clad, English-impaired “Mamasan” (23), the reader encounters educated, allusive, trilingual fluency. [...] The journal entries of Mrs. Nguyen afford the older immigrant, the adult, her own voice, which is often sceptical, less willing blithely to embrace the new country and its mores. (155)

Mai has the desire to learn more about the private thoughts of her mother, her sense of duty, however, prevents her from reading more of the journals: “In one of my desperate attempts to reach her I had felt inclined to steal the confessions I knew were still stored in her drawers. I wanted to break through the membrane that kept us apart and plunge headfirst into a prenatal space where I could reach my mother’s true thoughts” (Cao 134). Whereas the revelation of Thanh’s anxieties would help Mai to understand and act accordingly, Mai is left with a feeling of permanent guilt, never receiving the answers of questions she does not even dare to ask. Mai sometimes wishes for a real fight, being able to act on their emotions instead of keeping their distance.

As I lay in bed, I actually missed the overt battles of other people’s families, the evident, articulated frustrations of the parent and the child. I would have gladly traded my mother’s subtlety for voracious rage. Indeed, tonight I would have gladly traded my mother for anyone else’s mother. [...] I thought of slipping into bed with her, of squeezing myself between the embrace of her arms and demanding that she become more capable of direct and frank displays of emotion.

Of course I did nothing. (Cao 201)

Until the end, to Thanh’s suicide, they never have a direct and honest talk about the secrets that lay between them. It is only from her mother’s diaries that Mai learns about what really happened in the past. The reconciliation with her mother and the final liberation from her burdened family history, takes place only after Thanh’s death. In some ways, Mai thinks, the

suicide was her mother's way of helping her to move on. "A brand new slate, that was what my mother had supposedly given me, a slate unmarred by any undercurrents or tremors of Saigon or even Falls Church, Virginia" (Cao 257).

6.3.3 Old world parents and new world children

Mai, as a 1.5 immigrant, has to find a way to break loose from her Vietnamese past. Her mother becomes an obstacle in this struggle, because she is herself caught in this past and therefore cannot participate in American life. In contrast to Thanh, a war refugee, for whom America is no more than an exile, a place that she wishes to leave eventually, the first-generation immigrants in *TNS* – at least Ashoke – made a voluntary decision to go abroad. They look at America as their new home. Although, over time, they do assimilate to a certain extent, most of their old-world values are conserved. It is important to them that Gogol also learns the Bengali ways, but they still allow him to grow up as what he is, an American. When Gogol is child, Ashima pays attention that he understands where he comes from, what his roots are, e.g. she is teaching "him to memorize a four-line children's poem by Tagore, and the names of the deities adorning the ten-handed goddess Durga during pujo: Sarawati with her swan and Kartik with his peacock to her left, Lakshmi with her owl and Ganesh with his mouse to her right" (Lahiri 54). Nevertheless, Ashima is aware that she also has to provide Gogol with American cultural input that she herself cannot provide. So, every afternoon when she takes a nap, "before nodding off she switches the television to Channel 2, and tells Gogol to watch *Sesame Street* and *The Electric Company*, in order to keep up with the English he uses at nursery school" (Lahiri 54). Instinctively, she equips him with what he needs to become a transcultural person.

The problems Gogol, nevertheless, encounters, as a result of being the son of immigrants, are mostly due to the fact that he himself never lived in India long enough to fully understand his parents. They sometimes seem provincial and reactionary to him. In his childhood and adolescence, he mostly is embarrassed by his parents and tries to escape their world as much as possible.

At around fourteen years of age, Gogol increasingly neglects the Bengali traditions that he used to practice at home. His behaviour more and more resembles that of an average American teenager: "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). Part of the anger and resentment he sometimes feels for his parents for being different, stems from the fact that they named him Gogol. His name is strange not even *because* it is Indian but because it is *not* Indian and, therefore, taking on a whole new form of strangeness. With this name, he figures, he will never be able to feel normal, something that he desires more than anything else. As a teenager, when he is still in the dark about the real reason behind his name, he cannot help but resent his father for - what he believes - selfishly naming him after *his* favourite author. When Ashoke, at Gogol’s fourteenth birthday, tries to explain what made him choose his name, he only encounters disinterest and defiance.

“I feel a special kinship with Gogol,” Ashoke says, “more than with any other writer. Do you know why?”

“You like his stories.”

“Apart from that. He spent most of his adult life outside his homeland, like me.”

Gogol nods. “Right.”

“And there is another reason.” The music ends and there is silence. But then Gogol flips the record, turning the volume up on “Revolution 1.”

“What’s that?” Gogol says, a bit impatiently. [...]

“No other reason. Good night,” he says to Gogol, getting up from the bed. (Lahiri 78)

Moreover, Gogol again blames his parents’ cultural otherness to be the source of the problem:

“I don’t get it. Why did you have to give me a pet name in the first place? What’s the point?”

“It’s our way, Gogol,” his mother maintained. “It’s what Bengalis do.”

“But it’s not even a Bengali name.” (Lahiri 99)

Gogol’s decision to change his name is an attempt to leave everything that he connects with behind. He enters university as Nikhil, banning strange Gogol and his equally strange parents, together with their tradition, from his life. Changing his name also includes courage, since through this, highly symbolic act he cuts the cord to his parental protection, moving beyond a point of no return. “In spite of his parent’s sanction he feels that he is overstepping them, correcting a mistake they’ve made” (Lahiri 101).

His second act of emancipation is that he registers architecture as his major subject. Well aware of the subversiveness of this decision, “[h]e doesn’t tell his parents about the drawing class, something they would consider frivolous at this stage of his life, in spite of the fact that his own grandfather was an artist” (Lahiri 104). Like other children of the Gangulis’ Bengali

friends, Gogol is expected to be, “if not an engineer, then a doctor, a lawyer, an economist at the very least. These were the fields that brought them to America, his father repeatedly reminds him” (Lahiri 105). He has always tried to please his parents and yielded to their expectations, “[b]ut now as Nikhil it’s easier to ignore his parents, to tune out their concerns and pleas” (Lahiri 105).

A further step in his emancipation process is the romantic relationship he engages in with an American girl, Maxine Ratliff. Again, he knows that it is hopeless to introduce her to her parents because he knows that they would not approve: “One day Maxine asks him if his parents want him to marry an Indian girl. She poses the question out of curiosity, without hoping a particular response. He feels angry at his parents then, wishing they could be otherwise, knowing in his heart what the answer is. ‘I don’t know,’ he tells her. ‘I guess so. It doesn’t matter what they want’” (Lahiri 139). Again, he silently resents his parents for their strict adherence to the Bengali tradition. “But Gogol knows it isn’t right. He wishes his parents could simply accept her, as her family accepts him, without pressure of any kind. [...] They’ve been gone so far as to point out examples of Bengali men they know who’ve married Americans, marriages that have ended in divorce” (Lahiri 116/7).

Maxine opens a completely new world for Gogol, a world in which he is Nikhil, an Indian-American: slightly exotic, but not irritatingly strange; sophisticated and modern, instead of old-fashioned and backward. In Maxine’s social scene, this is a version of otherness that is appreciated as something that makes him interesting. Gerald and Lydia, Maxine’s parents, “are at once satisfied and intrigued by his background, by his years at Yale and Columbia, his career as an architect, his Mediterranean looks. “‘You could be Italian,’ Lydia remarks” (Lahiri 134). For the first time in his life, Gogol experiences his immigrant background as enrichment and not as burden: “Eventually the talk turns to India. [...] They have never known a person who has been to Calcutta” (Lahiri 134).

Gogol admires Maxine for her “gift of accepting her life” and never wishing “to be anyone other than herself, raised in any other place in any other way” (Lahiri 138), a feeling that he does not know. For him, it has always been a struggle to accept himself and his origin.

This, in his opinion, is the biggest difference between them, a thing far more foreign to him than the beautiful house she’d grown up in, her education at private schools. In addition he is continually amazed by how much Maxine emulates her parents, how much she respects their tastes and their ways. [...] There is none of the exasperation

he feels with his own parents. No sense of obligation. Unlike his parents, they pressure her to do nothing, and yet she lives faithfully, happily, at their side. (Lahiri 138)

Gogol notices how easy Maxine's relationship to her parents seems in contrast to his own. He is stunned that she still lives at home by choice, claiming "[t]here's really nowhere else I'd rather live" (Lahiri 132), and with what appreciation they treat each other. He especially enjoys their dinners that are the complete opposite to those that take place at his house. They have wine and lead sophisticated discussions "about things his own parents are indifferent to: movies, exhibits at museums, good restaurants, the designs of everyday things" (Lahiri 133). He is even a little bit jealous, for "something tells him that none of this is for his benefit, that this is the way the Ratliffs eat every night" (Lahiri 134). He also notices that they live "a different brand of hospitality from what he is used to" (Lahiri 136).

Unlike Gerald and Lydia, who preside at the centre of their dinners, his parents behave more like caterers in their own home, solicitous and watchful, waiting until most of their guests' plates were stacked by the sink in order finally to help themselves. (Lahiri 40/1)

When he falls in love with Maxine, he simultaneously "falls in love with the house, and Gerald and Lydia's manner of living" (Lahiri 137). But instead of being able to enjoy his time with the Ratliffs to the fullest, "he is conscious of the fact that his immersion in Maxine's family is a betrayal of his own" (Lahiri 141).

It isn't simply the fact that his parents don't know about Maxine, that they have no idea how much time he spends with her and Gerald and Lydia. Instead it is his knowledge that apart from their affluence, Gerald and Lydia are secure in a way his parents will never be. He cannot imagine his parents sitting at Lydia and Gerald's table, [...] contributing to one of their dinner party conversations. And yet here he is, night after night, a welcome addition to the Ratliffs' universe, doing just that. (Lahiri 141)

Ignoring the sensation of guilt caused by the shame he feels for his parents, he withdraws himself, as much as possible, from having to see or talk with his parents on the phone, and takes some time "in willing exile from his own life" (Lahiri 142). He is ashamed of himself and at the same time annoyed by his mother, who "[t]hough she says nothing for a while, he knows what his mother is thinking, that he is willing to" spend time "with someone else's parents but not see his own" (Lahiri 145). Gogol is so immersed in Maxine's unburdened world that he manages to put away his guilty feelings.

But such concerns [about his parent's wellbeing] make no sense here among Maxine and her family. [...] he remembers that his parents can't possibly reach him: he has not given them the number, and the Ratliffs are unlisted. That here at Maxine's side, in this cloistered wilderness, he is free. (Lahiri 158)

For some time, it looks to Gogol as if this arrangement – being Gogol at home and Nikhil the rest of the time - works very well. At a later stage in Gogol's life, when he has matured, he makes the attempt to reconnect with his parents and participates in some of their cultural activities. He tries to put himself into their position and learns to empathise with them. Instead of simply accepting their otherness, he starts to question what that must be like for them. The embarrassment for his parents makes way for admiration and appreciation, but also pity for what they had to go through. For example, “[h]e pities his parents [...] for having no experience of being young and in love” or when he thinks of the way “his parents have longed, all these years, for the people they love in India” (Lahiri 117).

The trigger for the reconciliation with his roots is Ashoke's unexpected death. He suddenly regrets to have missed the opportunity to spend more time with his father.

He thinks of the last time he'd seen him waving good-bye as he and Maxine pulled out of the driveway on their way to New Hampshire. He cannot remember the last time he and his father had spoken. Two weeks ago? Four? His father was not one to make frequent phone calls the way his mother does. (Lahiri 177)

During Gogol's period of grief he hardly sees Maxine. He does not want her around his family, because he senses that she does not belong. The fact that he increasingly shuts her out of his life, finally leads to their break-up. Maxine's feeling of being excluded from his life goes “so far one day as to admit that she felt jealous of his mother and sister” (Lahiri 188).

Initially she'd tolerated his silence at the dinner table, his indifference in bed, his need to speak to his mother and Sonia every evening, to visit them, on weekends, without her. But she had not understood being excluded from the family's plans to travel to Calcutta that summer to see their relatives and scatter Ashoke's ashes in the Ganges. (Lahiri 188)

Gogol's second serious girl-friend and later wife, Moushumi Mazoomdar, is a Bengali. He meets her because his mother wants him to. Initially, he does not intend to agree to the

meeting, because “as much as he wants to make his mother happy, he refuses to let her set him up with someone. He refuses to go that far” (Lahiri 192). Also Moushumi admits that she principally does not date men that fit her parent’s criteria. Nevertheless, they agree to meet.

Moushumi and Gogol know each other from childhood. Moushumi used to attend the dinner parties at the Gangulis’ house with her parents. Gogol is slightly agitated by the fact that she knows the old-world version of him, the *Gogol* – version. “It had annoyed him, when he’d called her, that she hadn’t recognized him as Nikhil. This is the first time he’s been out with a woman who’d once known him by that other name” (Lahiri 193). Despite their initial reluctance to date a Bengli, which on top of it all, has been chosen by their mothers, they start seeing each other. Both are surprised how similar their childhood experiences are and how well they can relate to each other’s lives.

He can imagine her life, even after she and her family moved away to New Jersey, easily. He can imagine the large suburban house her family owned; the china cabinet in the dining room, her mother’s prized possession; [...] There had been the same frequent trips to Calcutta, being plucked out of their American lives for months at a time. They calculate the many months that they were in that distant city together, on trips that had overlapped by weeks and once by months, unaware of each other’s presence. They talk about how they are both routinely assumed to be Greek, Egyptian, Mexican – even in these misrenderings they are joined. (Lahiri 212)

They are both dazzled by the easiness and the uncomplicatedness of their relationship. “At restaurants and bars, they sometimes slip Bengali phrases into their conversations in order to comment with impunity on another diner’s unfortunate hair or shoes. They talk endlessly about how they know and do not know each other. In a way there is little to explain” (Lahiri 211). However, their familiarity is also the reason why the marriage does not last.

Though she knows it’s not his fault, she can’t help but associate him, at times, with a sense of resignation, with the very life she had resisted, had struggled so mightily to leave behind. He was not who she saw herself ending up with, he had never been that person. Perhaps for those very reasons, in those early months, being with him, falling in love with him, doing precisely what had been expected of her for her entire life, had felt forbidden, wildly transgressive, a breach of her own instinctive will. (Lahiri 250)

6.4 Body

The body plays a recurrent role in immigrant novels. On the one hand, there are physical, unchangeable features of a person’s appearance. They are so immanent to the person that they are inseparable of their identity. On the other hand, people can create an image of themselves

by the way they dress and style themselves. Clothes have an important social function in communicating who we are.

6.4.1 Physical characteristics as imprints of identity

In **DC**, two protagonists show interesting physical characteristics. Celia has a beauty mark by her upper lip. It stands for her love to Gustavo. He praises her mole and even writes a poem about it, “the *lunar* by her mouth” (García 36). In an attempt to intensify her memory of her love to Gustavo, Celia darkens the mole with eyeliner to accent it. Whereas the person she loves the most praises her mole, the person she hates the most, her abhorrent mother-in-law Berta Arango del Pino, considers it to be another of Celia’s imperfections (García 40).

Lourdes is endowed with an extraordinarily equipped body part: her right eye. “The muscles of her right eye have been weak since she was a child, and every so often the eye drifts to one side, giving her a vaguely cyclopean air. It doesn’t diminish her 20/20 vision, only skews it a bit. Lourdes is convinced it enables her to see things that others don’t” (García 17). Also Pilar is certain of this. She thinks that her mother “filters other people’s lives through her distorting lens. It makes her see only what she wants to see instead of what’s really there” (García 176).

An astonishing similarity to Lourdes’ supernatural eyesight is Thanh’s extraordinary sense of hearing in **MB**. Her ears bestow her with skills that are almost super-power-like. “The Bionic Woman delighted my mother. [...] They both shared bionic ears. Hers, my mother believed, empowered her to hear things no one else could. Like the Chinese, the Vietnamese believed a set of long ears was a sign of longevity and luck” (Cao 9). The notion of ears as sacred body parts goes back to ancient Chinese medical textbooks that describe the ear as a miracle organ which contains every anatomical point in its membrane. In acupuncture, the ear is believed to have great healing powers. Thanh’s belief in her magic ears is crucial to her identity. In her diary, where she tells the story of her ancestors, she writes that by having been born with these special ears, she will be able to clear her family’s karma. “Through my ears, my [Than’s] mother proclaimed, I would have the power to repair [...] generation after generation of past wrongs by healing the faces of karma itself” (Cao 52).

Than discovers another physical particularity of her body: a second lifeline on her palm. “Come look, Bill,” she urged, proffering him her arm. “I have a new lifeline,” my mother repeated. She did, in fact, have a shadow of a line, running like a long, shallow arc, parallel to her lifeline” (Cao 210/1). This second lifeline can be interpreted in different ways. It could

mean a change of direction, since it forks off from the old one. It could also indicate that Thanh leads a double life. It then can be read as a sign that she will be able to escape from the one of her life, that is marked by multiple turns – “an amalgamation of incompatible odds and ends” (Cao 211). However, after her mother’s suicide, Mai asks herself if the double lifeline could have been “a single line of imminent death” (Cao 256).

Another instance where the physical is linked to the psychical is Ashima’s pregnancy:

For being a foreigner, Ashima is beginning to realise, is a sort of lifelong pregnancy – a perpetual wait, a constant burden, a continuous feeling out of sorts. It is an ongoing responsibility, a parenthesis in what had once been ordinary life, only to discover that that previous life has vanished, replaced by something more complicated and demanding. Like pregnancy, being a foreigner, Ashima believes, is something that elicits the same curiosity from strangers, the same combination of pity and respect. (Lahiri 49/50)

Body marks of special significance are scars, because they are imprints of someone’s personal history. Scars literally tell incisive events that people have experienced in their lives. Like these events become part of the person’s identity, the scars become part of their body.

DC’s Lourdes bears the scars of the most traumatic event in her life, the rape:

When he finished, the soldier lifted the knife and began to scratch at Lourdes’s belly with great concentration. A primeval scraping. Crimson hieroglyphics. [...]

Not until later, after the tall soldier had battered her with his rifle and left with his lumpy, quiet friend, after she had scoured her skin and hair with detergents meant for the walls and tile floors, after stanching the blood with cotton and gauze and wiping the steam from the bathroom mirror, did Lourdes try to read what he had carved. But it was illegible. (García 72)

MB’s Thanh has a similarly disastrous scar: a burn scar that is covering the bigger part of her face. It is the physical trace of the night when she returned to her village from the strategic hamlet, where she and the other villages have been relocated, to bury her mother in the palace of her ancestors, according to Vietnamese tradition. There, she accidentally witnesses Baba Quan killing her biological father, the landlord Uncle Khan. At the same time, bombs are dropped on the village, leaving Thanh in coma for six months and the scar in her face. Through this war, “Thanh’s body becomes a living symbol of the fragmentation of war and exile” (Long 16 qtd. in Tuon 12).

Moreover, the scar “also serves as significant marker of Thanh’s decision to deny Mai access to her past” (12), as she lies to her daughter about what injury caused the scar. She tells Mai that it stems from a kitchen accident. Thanh wears the scar with pride, reminding that she survived a war. Mai, in an attempt to help her mother, buys her special creams and make-up to cover up the scar in her face and does not understand why she refuses to use any of it (Cao 3). She is unaware that her mother takes this as an offence:

I know the real reason why she wants to leave. It’s my face, the face of her mother, her very own face, from which she wants to flee. How can I teach her that the worthwhile enterprise is the enterprise of learning to live with our scars? [...] she looks at her mother’s face and sees scars, takes it for a sign of damage, not badge of survival. (Cao 55/4)

TNS’s character Ashoke does not have a scar that reminds him of his trauma. However, the accident, that left him with several broken ribs and a permanently paralysed leg and other severe injuries, is manifest in his limp and a habit to lay his hand onto his ribcage to feel the bones. Although Ashoke claims to have overcome his trauma, not least by the symbolical act of naming his son after his lifesaver, the compulsive gesture in the scene where he finally tells Gogol the story behind his name, suggests otherwise. When Gogol asks if he reminds him of the fateful night of the accident, Ashoke says he does not. Instead, he tells Gogol that he reminds him of “everything that followed” (Lahiri 124). At this very moment, “one hand going to his ribs” (Lahiri 124), he “silently indulges in his checking ritual, which signifies a quite different story from the one that is being simultaneously delivered by speech” (Munos 13). The implication is that Ashoke still has to think about the accident and as not left this part of his past behind.

6.4.2 Dressing up

In the social world, we express who we are through our clothes. The way people dress tells much about their cultural background and personality.

In **DC**, Lourdes habit of dressing is described. “Lourdes puts on a size 26 white uniform with wide hip pockets and flat, rubber-soled shoes. She has six identical outfits in the closet, and two more pair of shoes. Lourdes is pleased with her uniform’s implicit authority, with the severity of her unadorned face and blunt, round nose” (García 17). The identity that she conveys with this dress-code is that of a stern businesswoman, authoritarian mother and rigorous wife.

In **TNS**, Ashima's clothes visualise her loyalty to her home culture. After her immigration she continues to consistently wear a Sari. For Gogol, her mother's Sari is a natural part of her appearance since he never sees her without it. As a young boy, when drawing "a picture of himself and his parents and his new sibling, standing in a row in front of their house", he naturally "remembers to put a dot on his mother's forehead" (Lahiri 61). Whereas Gogol finds it completely normal that his parents wear Indian traditional clothes, he himself feels uncomfortable with it. At his wedding, for example, he is expected to wear a Punjabi that used to belong to his father. "He imagines his father wearing an outfit similar to his own, a shawl draped over one shoulder, as he used to during pujo. The ensemble he fears looks silly on himself would have looked dignified, elegant, befitting his father in a way he knows it does not him" (Lahiri 221). Since clothes express identity, Gogol feels that for him it is unauthentic to wear Bengali clothes, after all he has an American self-image.

6.4.3 Disease

DC deals with the body also in form of sickness and disease. The disease that invades the bodies of Celia and her son Javier is cancer. There is a link between cancer and Cuba and communism. Whereas the characters who remain in Cuba, Javier, Celia and Felicia die, the characters who emigrate Pilar, Lourdes, and Ivanito, survive. Only the dead, like Jorge, go back to Cuba to stay for good (Machado Sáez 142). Even though Celia, unlike Javier, does not die of cancer, it leaves an imprint in her body: "the doctors remove her left breast. In its place they leave a pink, pulpy scar" (García 160), "[t]here's a scar like a purple zipper on her chest" (García 218).

The characters who suffer from cancer, Javier and Celia, are supporters of the communist regime, which the opposing capitalist characters, Jorge and Lourdes, metaphorically refer to as *cancer*: "'That's how it began in Cuba,' Lourdes's father whispered hoarsely through the trees, counselling her. 'You must stop the cancer at your front door'" (García 171). Pilar notes that her mother "says 'communist' the way some people say 'cancer', low and fierce" (García 26).

MB also uses physical illness as an image to describe other, more abstract forms of disease. For the first part of the novel, Thanh is in hospital recovering from a cerebral vascular accident that has left her left side paralyzed. This paralysis can be interpreted as an imprint of the lack of being able to fully be herself in the USA. She "is trapped, licked in a linguistic,

cultural, and geographical borders within the United States” (Tuon 9). This image, of the “physically split self, where one side of the body is literally paralysed” (Tuon 9/10), reflects Thanh’s psychological condition of being split between two worlds and only connected to one part of her self: she “suffered from what the nurses called ‘left neglect,’ meaning that her left side could appear as separate and apart from the rest of her body as somebody’s disembodied left side” (Cao 135). Not only Thanh’s body and soul is split but also the Vietnam. Thanh’s body represents the microcosm and Vietnam the macrocosm. Thus, the war between the North and South Vietnam also stands also for the war inside of Thanh. “It was a war that essentially sliced the soul of our village in two, it was a war that disrupted the luminous motion of the earth” (Cao 237). Thanh’s body becomes a “repository for her unspeakable losses and unburied dead” (Stocks 88) suggesting a comparison to the country Vietnam itself with “its hidden minefields and burial grounds” (Cao 64).

Moreover, Thanh’s condition can be interpreted as a result of the multiple psychic traumata she experienced during the war. Mai connects her mother’s beaten body to the war: “Her body had become a battle field, she was a war wound fastened to a bed in a suburban hospital more equipped to deal with caesarean sections and other routine operations” (Cao 7).

The rehabilitation is a difficult process for Thanh, since she cannot summon up enough motivation and Mai has to force her to do the exercises. Her body is so weak that it appears to Mai even lifeless: “my mother had laid her body diagonally across her small twin bed, with a blanket securely draped over her, like a corpse”. This reflects Thanh’s abandonment of hope and the will to recover during this time. When Thanh’s body shows recovery, there seems to also be the possibility for recovery of her soul: “Her recent recovery into hope and health meant that a possibility for happiness could exist in her flesh and skin [...]” (Cao 159).

6.4.4 Eating disorders

Eating disorders are due to some kind of psychical distress. Food either becomes the substitution for a craving for something inaccessible that cannot be satisfied otherwise, or the opposite, a form of pollution of the body, the representative of a psychical burden. The body can gain mass, acquiring a layer of protection from the world, or it can lose mass, trying to become as little visible as possible, almost vanishing completely. Interestingly, all three novels hold characters who suffer from eating disorders of different degrees.

DC deals with Lourdes' body weight that shifts from one extreme into the other. Lourdes works in a bakery, feeling comforted by being surrounded by nothing but delightful and delicious food. The bakery is a symbol of her success and the place where she is completely in her element.

The early-morning refuge of the bakery delights Lourdes. She is comforted by the order of the round loaves, the texture of grain and powdered sugar, the sustaining aromas of vanilla and almond. Lourdes bought the bakery five years ago from a French-Austrian Jew who had migrated to Brooklyn after the war. Before that, she'd been working as a file clerk at a nearby hospital, classifying the records of patients who had died. Now she wanted to work with bread. What sorrow could there be in that? (García 18)

Lourdes, to whom eating is comfort, starts suffering from her disorder when her father's terminal cancer is diagnosed. The sicker her father gets, the more comfort she needs and the more she eats. Another way of distraction from the grief over her father's illness is sex: "The more she took her father to the hospital for cobalt treatments, the more she reached for the pecan sticky buns, and for Rulfino" (García 20).

In the four years, since her father arrived in New York, Lourdes gains 118 pounds. "The flesh amassed rapidly on her hips and buttocks, muting the angles of her bones. It collected on her thighs, fusing them above the knees. It hung from her arms like hammocks" (García 20). Not only the consequences of her dramatically increased appetite for food start to show, but also those of her sex-drive: "Rufino's body ached from the exertions. [...] He begged his wife for a few nights' peace but Lourdes's peals only became more urgent, her glossy black eyes more importunate. Lourdes was reaching through Rufino for something he could not give her, she wasn't sure what" (García 21).

When her father finally dies, Lourdes' grief paradoxically stops. She starts to envision her father and speaks to him. For her, it is like he came back for her and hence, her fear of losing him that has distressed her before, evaporates. As a result, she stops eating. Lourdes, however, does not realise the connection between the condition of her father and her eating behaviour, since she "did not plan to stop eating" (García 169) consciously. "I just happened, like the time she gained 118 pounds in the days her father was dying" (García 169).

Lourdes starts to starve herself, in an attempt to undo what weeks of uncontrolled eating and giving in to her desires have caused. The food in the bakery now makes her feel sick instead

of providing comfort. Instead, she gains satisfaction from experiencing the result of her new-found self-discipline.

Lourdes welcomes the purity, the hollowness of her stomach. It's been a month since she stoppend eating, and already she's lost thirty-four pounds. She envisions the muscled walls of her stomach shrinking, contracting, slickly clean from the absence of food and the gallons of springwater she drinks. She feels transparent, as if the hard lines of her hulking form were disintegrating. (García 167)

In addition to her abstinence from food, she also stops to have relations with her husband. She is disgusted by the needy and undisciplined person she was during her father's sickness. "It's as if another woman had possessed her in those days, a whore, a life-craving whore who fed on her husband's nauseating clots of yellowish milk" (García 169).

Losing weight is like a journey for Lourdes, not only metaphorically, but also literally. She rides her exercise bicycle and charts the kilometres on a map of the US. Her aim is to ride to San Francisco by Thanksgiving. She likes the exercise, because it regularly gives her the feeling of accomplishment that she is so hungry for. The exhaustion and the sweating have a cleansing effect on her.

Lourdes is able to achieve her goal. To Thanksgiving "her metamorphosis is complete" (García 172). She has lost every ounce of the 118 pounds she has gained during her grief over her father's dwindling health. For Lourdes, losing weight has been a matter of proving to herself and others that she is in control of things. "Willpower. Willower goes a long way toward getting what you want" (García 172), she proudly tells her daughter.

Pilar draws a connection between Lourdes' weight loss and migration experience, remarking that "migration scrambles the appetite" and adding that she will "move back to Cuba someday and decide to eat nothing but codfish and chocolate" (García 173) to provoke her mother.

Lourdes is not able to keep her weight down and as quickly as she lost it, she gains it again. There is no way out, she is caught in a cycle. That shows, that in the end, she is unable to control everything.

On Fifth Avenue, Lourdes stops to buy hot dogs (with mustard, relish, sauerkraut, fried onions, and ketchup), two chocolate cream sodas, a potato knish, lamb shish kebabs with more onions, a soft pretzel, and a cup of San Marino cherry ice. Lourdes eats, eats, eats, like a Hindu goddess with eight arms, eats, eats, eats, as if famine were immanent. (García 174)

A parallel to Lourdes relationship to food, can be found in **MB**. Here, it is Thanh's best friend and neighbour, Mrs. Bay, who seeks comfort in eating. Similarly she owns a bakery that is part of her Mekong Grocery store. Similarly to Lourdes, by eating she covers up a loss, the loss of her home. She "had sprung an additional sixty pounds, fifteen for each of the four years she lived in the United States (Cao 63). As opposed to Lourdes she does not try to get rid of her surplus weight, blithely posing the rhetorical question "What shame could there be in that?" (Cao 63). After all, her pastries, eating and baking them, make her agony go away:

A round bulk of flesh bent in concentration over the store's counter, her chin flat against her chest, her right hand working the floured mixture into an obedience of buttery smoothness. She took pleasure in feeling the butter, sticks of it dissolve under the force of the spatula and mingle yolks, flour, and sugar. She could stir anxiety away this way, in a dimly lit kitchen in the grocery store, while Bill and the other regulars – American soldiers – hovered nearby and waited to tell her their stories. (Cao 64)

Moreover, the concept of keeping a diet to lose weight is entirely foreign to the Vietnamese, who do not even possess a word *diet* in their language, so that "the English word itself had to be directly transported and appropriated as part of the local Vietnamese vocabulary. Before Mrs. Bay invented this English word, most of her friends assumed it was American-specific, and that as a result they would be genetically immune from amassing weight" (Cao 62/3).

In **TNS**, the character Moushumi has weight problems that had bothered her since she was a teenager. When her fiancée, Graham, cancels their wedding, she slides into a phase of depression and hardly leaves her house. Her frustration ruins her appetite and she has not the energy to supply herself with proper meals. As a consequence, "[s]he began to subsist on a diet of raita and Triscuits" and "grew thinner than she'd ever been in her life, so that in the few pictures taken of her in that period her face is faintly unrecognizable" (Lahiri 218). Moushumi's weight loss is only temporary, since her reluctance of food is limited to the period when she is lovesick. "She went to end-of summer sales and bought everything in a size four; six months later she would be forced to donate it all to a thrift shop" (Lahiri 218).

6.5 Psyche

In this section, the various ways the psyche is affected by the immigration or other crucial experiences in one's past are dealt with. Each of the novels features characters that have to

come to terms with trauma, loss, grief, solitude and homesickness, all showing different ways of suffering and dealing with their fate.

6.5.1 Trauma

CD's protagonist Lourdes deals with, at least, three traumata: the abandonment by her mother when she was an infant, the miscarriage of her second child leaving her infertile, and the rape inflicted on her by a communist soldier.

All traumata are unresolved and regularly invade her present. One passage in the novel describes Lourdes sitting down on a bench by a fountain, when suddenly, in the

greenish water, by the sad, sputtering fountain, she sees the face of her unborn child, pale and blank as an egg, buoyed by the fountain waters. Her child calls to her, waves a bare little branch in greeting. Lourdes fills her heart to bursting with the sight of him. She reaches out and calls his name, but he disappears before she can rescue him. (García 174/5)

She suddenly is reminded of the loss the death of her unborn child caused and a trauma or “wound inside her reopens” (García 174). Besides hallucination, Lourdes suffers from other symptoms typical of trauma. Pilar, for example reports of her mother's sleeping problems, that she “slept in air thin and nervous as a magnetic field, attracting small disturbances” and nightmares: “She tossed and turned all night, as if she were wrestling ghosts in her dreams” (García 221). From her childhood, Pilar recalls her mother waking up in the middle of the night, “crying” and “clutching her stomach and moaning from deep inside a place I couldn't understand. Dad would stroke her forehead until she fell asleep again” (García 221). Unlike Pilar, the reader, who knows about Lourdes' miscarriage, can imagine what her dreams are about. Moreover, Lourdes' habit of re-inventing the truth – whether consciously or unconsciously – seems to be a result of trauma.

Lourdes leaves Cuba not only for political and economic reasons but also to escape her past. However, she has to realise that trauma has a way of following its victims and that running away is no solution. It takes the resurrection of her dead father, telling her to reconcile with her mother, to finally make her realise that there is no other way to find closure but to go back to Cuba.

“You must go to them.”
“I can't go back. It's impossible.”

“There are things you must do, things you will only know when you get there.”

“You don’t understand,” Lourdes cries and searches for the breeze above her. She smells the brilliantined hair, feels the scraping blade, the web of scars it left on her stomach.

“I know about the soldier, Lourdes. I’ve known all these years,” her father says evenly. “But your mother never knew, I swear it. [...] Please return and tell your mother everything, tell her I’m sorry, I love you, *mi hija*.” (García 196/7)

This is Lourdes’ final conversation with the ghost of her father before he forever vanishes. It seems as if telling Lourdes to return to Cuba is the ultimate reason why he lingered on – or Lourdes let him stay – a little while longer among the living than his illness would have allowed.

The journey to Cuba leads Lourdes to the sites of her traumata and the confrontation with her fears:

Lourdes’s thoughts come sniffing like underfed dogs. She remembers the night the lightning hit the royal palm, how the birds circled in confusion before scattering north.

She lost her second child in this place. A baby boy. A boy she would have named Jorge, after her father. A boy, Lourdes recalls, a boy in a soft clot of blood at her feet. (García 227)

However, she fails to make amends with her mother, who she still resents so deeply that she neither can forgive her, nor can she ask for forgiveness. Instead of overcoming her trauma, the pain reappears: “The words refuse to form in her mouth. Instead, like a brutal punishment, Lourdes feels the grip of her mother’s hand on her bare infant leg, hears her mother’s words before she left of the asylum: ‘I will not remember her name.’” (García 238). There is no affection between Lourdes and Celia. They are still strangers to each other, making Lourdes realise that “some things can never change” (García 223). Maybe, Lourdes would have had more understanding for her mother, if she had known that Celia herself was abandoned by her own mother and that she actually promised to herself not to do the same to Lourdes. But Celia only tells Pilar about her own childhood trauma:

“When I was a girl, I used to dry tobacco leaves one at a time,” she begins in a quiet voice.

“They stained my hands, my face, the rags on my body. One day, my mother bathed me in a tin tub behind our house and rubbed me with straw until my skin bled. I put on the ruffled dress she had made, a hat with ribbons, and patent-leather shoes, the

first I ever wore. My feet felt precious, tied up like shiny parcels. Then she left me on a train and walked away.” (García 222)

The conflicted relationship between the Lourdes and her mother, therefore, already has its origin in the trauma experienced by the child Celia who has been sent away by her mother. The trauma seems to echo through the generations, still affecting Lourdes’ and Pilar’s mother-daughter relationship.

Lourdes also is not able to tell her mother about her rape. The fact that she cannot confront this trauma, adds to the impossibility to reconnect with her mother. In the end, therefore, Lourdes’ return to Cuba cannot resolve the issues that separate her from her mother. Still, she makes up for her own lost childhood by giving Ivanito the possibility to leave Cuba, a place “which the novel continually associates with sickness, stagnancy and death” (Saéz 143).

Lourdes, unlike other traumatised people, does not have the problem of re-incorporating the traumatic event into her live, suppressing the memory of it. On the contrary, she wants to hold on to this memory and is desperate for some kind of consequence from the universe for the pain she had to suffer through:

She remembers a story she read once about Guam, about how brown snakes were introduced by Americans. The snakes strangled the native birds one by one. They ate the eggs from the nests until the jungle had no voice.

What she fears most is this: that her rape, her baby’s death were absorbed quietly by the earth, that they are ultimately no more meaningful than falling leaves on an autumn day. She hungers for a violence of nature, terrible and permanent, to record the evil. Nothing less would satisfy her. (García 229)

The novel in which trauma has the most power of over the characters is **MB**. However, the characters do not experience trauma as a “temporal gap that makes the actual experience of trauma unknowable and unrepresentable” (Satterlee 138) as defined by Cathy Caruth. Thanh does not as much suffer from memory *loss* as the need to *reinvent* memory. Not only does she lie to Mai about the past – telling her that she missed Baba Quan when she escaped, concealing that he was a Vietcong and the murderer of her biological father, and pretending that her scar was caused by a kitchen fire – she also lies to herself. What she writes down in her journal is no accurate account of her life, but, as labelled by Pilar, “gorgeous fictional remainings of an improvised life – the life she wished she had” (Cao 255). Even though, in

Thanh's case, the past is remembered and represented through a fictional narrative, trauma "assumes a haunting quality, continuing to possess the subject with its insistent repetitions and returns" (Whitehead 12), namely in the form of "unconscious dreams – delirious on occasion" (Cao 158), as Pilar reports: "'Baba Quan. Baba Quan,' she repeated, his name coming out of her throat as a long infernal moan, like none I had heard come out of her before" (Cao 4).

Baba Quan is the figure standing at centre of Thanh's trauma. He is introduced by Mai already at the very beginning of the narrative as her grandfather, to whom her mother "had always been devoted to" (Cao 4). According to Mai's account, the nightmares are caused by Thanh's feelings of guilt for having left Vietnam without him. Although Baba Quan is physically absent, he continually haunts Mai and Thanh's present:

[M]y mother left her father, her only remaining family member behind. From that day on, my grandfather's absence glistened just beyond the touch of our fingertips. During those moments when my mother sat alone by the window, I could almost see her hand trying to make contact with the moment when her father had failed to appear. The memory of that day continues to thrash its way through her flesh, and there were times when I thought she would never be consoled. (Cao 4/5)

The narrative circles around the character of Baba Quan who continuously appears in form Mai's memory or Thanh and Michael's stories. Uncle Michael elevates Baba Quan to a superhero, telling Mai the literally "unbelievable" story how he saved an entire army unit by guiding them through a labyrinth of mines planted by the Americans that he remembered just by watching (Cao 109-114). For his heroic deed, he is awarded two medals by the American Army. When Uncle Michael tells Mai this story, she has the following thoughts: "'Now are you happy?'" he seemed to say. And I was. [...] 'It sounds almost like storybook story. You know, like it's almost too good to be true,' I said" (Cao 114). Mai's observation is correct. In fact, the story is only a legend, invented by Michael to camouflage the real identity of her grandfather. Here again, an ending is re-written.

Mai admires her grandfather, to her a person of great wisdom and integrity, and employs his wise sayings at various points in the novel. By Mai's portrayal, the figure of Baba Quan is mythologised and receives a guru- or prophet-like aura, thus, not suspected at all to be a man who would prostitute his wife, and be a war criminal and murderer.

Although the reader is presented with the larger-than-life heroic version of Baba Quan, his interior stays hidden and Baba Quan remains elusive, also to Mai herself: “My grandfather had always straddled the line between the living and the dead” (Cao 159). His physical appearance, too, reflects this elusiveness. Mai describes him as not “large or bulky” (Cao 59), a “frail figure” (Cao 164), “delicate looking”, “slender as an impeccable specimen of driftwood”, comparable to “bamboo”, with a beauty “of a different sort, raw and elegant” (Cao 59). Most of the knowledge of Baba Quan springs from Mai’s memory or imagination, since Thanh almost never talks to Mai about him and when she does, her “mother was not likely to be logical when it came to Grandfather and his whereabouts” (Cao 162). Eventually, she stops mentioning him at all: “It was as if Baba Quan had never existed, a mere phantom, a ghost of a name, no more, no less, she had once called out to in the middle of a foglike dream” (Cao 139).

The story cycles around this figure of Baba Quan, always suggesting that there is a hidden secret somewhere underneath what Thanh allows to surface, however, never revealing the mystery. Mai starts to suspect that there is more to the story of how her mother and Baba Quan missed each other on the day of the departure from Vietnam. She finds it strange that neither her mother, nor Uncle Michael support her idea to try to find Baba Quan and help him to leave Vietnam and live with them in Virginia. Mai develops a strong desire to find out the truth. She continues to ask her mother about the day, “like the detective who believed that a rehearsal of the same facts would in time reveal a detail that had previously been missed” (Cao 195). She starts obsessing with various scenarios of what could have happened with Baba Quan and comes up with the wildest plans to rescue him and reunite him with his remaining family. “I was in the realm of the wild and fantastic, but for the sake of my grandfather, for the sake of my mother, it felt right to explore even the flimsiest improbability” (Cao 199). She does not understand why her mother and Michael curb her enthusiasm and do not share her optimism. She blames them for not having tried harder to find him. What she does not know is that with this topic she addresses her mother’s deepest trauma.

Since her mother ignores Mai’s efforts to learn more about her past, she tries other ways. Mai secretly reads Thanh’s manuscripts, eager for every detail she learns about her mother:

I told myself that learning about my own and my mother’s history could save us both, my mother and me. It need not be an act of betrayal or a simple desire to see where life began and ended.

I began turning, turning, turning. I could feel the pulsing of veins that usually precedes entry into a forbidden, private realm. Here, right here, within my reach, was the truth of my mother's many lives, the vivid details that accompanied every fracture, every movement and shift that had forced her apart and at the same time kept her stitched together. (Cao 168)

Thanh does not realise that silence fails as a strategy, both, to protect Mai and to absolve her from the trauma. As a final consequence of the trauma, Thanh commits suicide. It is only after her death that Mai learns about the truth from Thanh's suicide note. By this means of intertextuality, Cao tells the trauma first-hand through Thanh's, instead of Mai's, narrative voice. This way, the reader has exactly the same surprise effect as Mai, when she first learns the truth about Baba Quan. The letter is a written testimony of the events that happened in the Mekong Delta. For Mai who has always wondered who this person, her mother, really was, the letter provides some answers, but also opens up a whole new set of questions: "What kinds of private thoughts did she have? I never knew she had a whole separate language of her own after she died, when I discovered it in a letter she write to me" (Cao 255). According to Tuon, in the "lateness of Thanh's decision to reveal the family secret to her daughter Mai, which therefore pre-empts any possibility of understanding and reconciliation between mother and daughter" (14/15), lies the true tragedy of the novel.

The novel's ending provides both, closure and also a new beginning. The death of her mother opens up a new chapter in Mai's life. Now that the ballast of her mother's past has vanished, a fresh start lies in front of her. The novel ends with her preparing for college: "I would follow the course of my own future. The acceptance letter from the Admissions Office whispered a starlight of reassurance" (Cao 260). Ironically, the closing sentence compromises this outlook on a future untainted by the past. Mai looks out the window and sees "a faint silver of what only two weeks ago had been a full moon dangled like a sea horse from the sky" (Cao 260). This image of the sea horse, which is commonly used to describe the shape of Vietnam (Thuon 13), functions as a reminder of the past. This last sentence can be read as "a confirmation of the novel's vision of 'inescapable history'" (Thuon 14). However, it can also be interpreted as a sign that Mai finally succeeded to integrate her and her family's past into her identity and that she does not have to abandon it forever.

Mai, besides having to deal with the inherited trauma of her family, also has to deal with her own trauma imposed by the atrocities and loss of family members she had to experience

during the war. She describes how she has to find ways to fight back the horrible recollections she has from the war:

We each had our own way. My mother had hers, I had mine. My philosophy was simply this: if I didn't see it at night, in nightmares or otherwise, it never happened. I had my routines: constant vigilance, my antidote to the sin of sleeping and the undomesticated world of dreams. I reach for the pills, my kind of comfort – verifiable peace in every hundred-milligram pellet of reliable, synthetic caffeine. What harm could there be in that? (Cao 11)

However, also while being awake, Mai is in a state of constant fear, always alert in case of some sudden danger that could strike out of nowhere. To be permanently afraid is like a habit Mai picked up during her time in the war: “One wrong move and something had tipped one notch too far and everything was pouring inside out, a live current of nervous wires connecting me to disorder, to insanity” (Cao, 12). This agitation and inability to rest is manifest in the narrative that very frequently and abruptly changes settings and times. Mai seems to be constantly transferred into the past and unable to control when her memory recollects.

The novel starts with a flashback Mai experiences in the hospital when she visits her mother. She has to remind herself that she is in Airlington Hospital in Virginia and not the Saigon military hospital where she volunteered back in the war. Whereas in European and US-American terms, hospitals are usually perceived as places of comfort and healing, for Mai, the hospital is associated with injury, disease and death. Moreover, the white that is used in Western hospitals comforts patients; for Mai, however, it has a distressing effect, since, in the Vietnamese cultural code, white is the colour of mourning.

All around me, the bare walls expanded and converged into a relentless stretch of white. The bedsheet white of the hallway was an anxious white I knew by heart. White, the color of mourning, the standard color for ghosts, bones, and funerals, swallowed in the surface calm of the hospital halls (Cao 1)

Flashbacks, like the one Mai has in the hospital, are a sign of trauma. In one particular passage in the book, Cao, quite figuratively, illustrates how close past and present are to Mai: Mai returns to Uncle Michael's house, where she lived for the first few months when she came to the USA. There, she takes a penny from under the carpet that she had placed “there one week after my arrival in the house – when the men had come to install a new carpet for

the family room”, reminding her that “[n]ineteen seventy-five, that terrible year, was still as present, and still as inevitable, as ever” (Cao 93).

Trauma in **NS** has a slightly different role. It lies already in the past and does not mingle with the present, although it has an effect on the present. The trauma that is represented in the novel is the train wreck Ashoke experiences when he is twenty-two years old. After the accident, Ashoke is temporarily paralysed and suffers from typical symptoms of post-traumatic stress:

At night he dreamed either that he was still trapped inside the train or, worse, that the accident had never happened, that he was walking down a street, taking a bath, sitting cross-legged on the floor and eating a plate of food. And then he would wake up, coated in sweat, tears streaming down his face, convinced that he would never live to do such things again. (Lahiri 19/20)

The positive effect of the haunting nightmares is that he avoids sleeping and studies during the nights. He starts to let go of the past, and instead begins to envision a future: “He imagined not only, walking, but walking away, as far as he could from the place in which he was born and in which he had nearly died” (Lahiri 20). He remembers the conversation with Gosh, the businessman who was on the train with him and lost his life in the accident. He was the one to first give him the idea to leave India. Gosh tells him that he just returned from England where he used to work and live with his wife.

“Seen much of the world?” Gosh asked Ashoke, untying his shoes and settling himself cross-legged in the berth. [...]

“Once to Delhi,” Ashoke replied. “And lately once a year to Jamshedpur.” Ghosh extended his arm out the window, flicking the glowing tip of his cigarette into the night. “Not this world,” he said, glancing disappointedly about the interior of the train. He tilted his head toward the window. “England. America,” he said, as if the nameless villages they passed had been replaced by those countries. “Have you considered going there?” [...]. “You are still young. Free,” he said, spreading his hands apart for emphasis. “Do yourself a favour. Before it’s too late, without thinking too much about it first, pack a pillow and a blanket and see as much of the world as you can. You will not regret it.” (Lahiri 15/6)

Trauma in **TNS** is a metaphorical death; surviving it, a rebirth. In Ashoke’s eyes, he owes his second life to Nikolai Gogol: “He cannot thank the book; the book has perished, as he nearly did, in scattered pieces, in the earliest hours of an October day, in a field 209 kilometres from Calcutta. Instead of thanking God he thanks Gogol, the Russian writer who had saved his life”

(Lahiri 21). When his son is born, he is inevitably reminded of the trauma and his own, second birth.

Although it is Ashima who carries the child, he, too, feels heavy, with the thought of life, of his life and the life about to come. He was raised without running water, nearly killed at twenty-two. Again he tastes the dust on his tongue, sees the twisted train, the giant overturned. None of this was supposed to happen. But no, he had survived it. (Lahiri 21)

Thus, when he and Ashima have to decide on a name for the baby, he chooses the name Gogol, the man who gave him his second life. His son simultaneously stands for his third life, the life as an immigrant: “He was born twice in India, and then a third time, in America” (Lahiri 21). Interestingly, the name of the man whom he owes the idea to emigrate and thus, indirectly was responsible for his third life, carries the name *Gosh* – “god”.

The fact that Lahiri chose a train as the setting for the trauma does not seem to be random. Already Foucault, in his theory of the *heterotopia*, the “other place”, points out the particularity of this place: “a train is an extraordinary bundle of relations because it is something *through* which one goes, it is also something by means of which one can *go from one point to another*, and then it is also something that *goes by* [emphasis added]” (Foucault 3). The train, simultaneously, stands for the trauma *and* the immigrant experience, symbolising departure and arrival, the link from one place to another. In that, the train has a similar function as a bridge, the symbol Cao uses to describe the very same notion of connectedness of two worlds apart. Similar to the train that proves to bear the risk of an accident, the monkey bridge is characterised by its fragility and the danger of falling down.

The villagers called them ‘monkey bridges,’ because the bridge was a thin pole of bamboo no wider than a grown man’s foot, roped together by vines and mangrove roots. A railing was tied to one side, so you could at least hold on to it as you made your way across like a monkey. Only the least fainthearted, the most agile would think about using this unsturdy suspension they call a bridge. (Cao 109/10)

The image of the bridge can be encountered also in DC, where the character who connects the old and the new world, is called Pilar *Puente*, which translates as “bridge” in English. Pilar’s surname “highlights her role as a bridge between the place and the people of the past and future” (Davis, 62). The heterotopias of trains or bridges are not only spaces that are in-

between different geographical or cultural places, but between times – past, present and future.

The train in TNS is a recurring setting for different turns in the lives of the protagonists. Ashoke, for example, chooses to tell Gogol the reason behind his name after he has been worried about him, because his train arrived with delay. The truth about his name links Gogol to his father's past and sheds a new light on his existence: "And suddenly the sound of his pet name, uttered by his father as he has been accustomed to hearing it all his life, means something completely new, bound up with a catastrophe he has unwittingly embodied for years" (Lahiri 124). After his father's death Gogol still has to think of him when he arrives at the train station, where he used to pick him up: "He remembers all coming to see him off each time, in his first year of college, he would head back to Yale. And though, over the years, his departures had become mundane, his father would always stand on the platform until the moment the train was out of sight" (Lahiri 184). In each train ride from New York to Boston, there is a brief moment where he inevitably is reminded of his father's accident:

Though the passengers seldom comment on this, the way they do, for example, when the engine changes at New Haven from diesel to electric with a sudden jolt, this momentary shift never fails to rouse Gogol from his nap, or the book he is reading, or the conversation he is engaged in, or the thought that has gathered in his head. The train tilts to the left heading south to New York, to the right on the way to Boston. In that brief period of suggested peril, he thinks, always, of the other train he has never seen, the one that had nearly killed his father. Of the disaster that has given him his name. (Lahiri 184/5).

In the time when Gogol struggles with his identity being split between his two names, it is the train journey from New York to Boston that marks the switch from one identity to the other: "Somewhere along the two-and-a-half-hour journey, Nikhil evaporates and Gogol claims him again" (Lahiri 106). It is on the train that he realises that, even though he lived his own life in New York, he is, and has always been, close to his parents. There is distance between him and them. A distance, however, that can be overcome by a simple train ride: "for most of his adult life he has never been more than a four-hour train ride away. And there was nothing apart from his family, to draw him home, to make this train journey, again and again". (Lahiri 281)

Another transition in Gogol's life, the split from Moushumi, takes place on a train: "It had been on the train, exactly a year ago, that he'd learned of Moushumi's affair" (Lahiri 282). In

this situation, the train, binding them together, hinders him to act on “[h]is first impulse [...] to get out at the next station, to be as physically far from her as possible” (Lahiri 282).

6.5.2 Loss/ grief/ solitude

A very typical experience connected to immigration is loss. Not only the immigrants themselves lose something by going away, but also those who are left behind suffer from the loss of their loved ones. So does Celia in **DC**. She has to grieve particularly many losses throughout her life, some caused by death and some by emigration: “Celia cannot decide which is worse, separation or death. Separation is familiar, too familiar, but Celia is uncertain she can reconcile it with permanence. Who could have predicted her life? What unknown covenants led her ultimately to this beach and this hour and this solitude?” (García 6).

One of the profoundest losses Celia experiences is when her lover Gustavo Sierra de Armas leaves her to return to Spain. She is inconsolable and loses her will to live. She visits a gypsy diviner to give her a potion to make an end to her pain. “She bought tiger root from Jamaica to scrape, a cluster of indigo, translucent crimson seed, and lastly, a tiny burlap pouch of herbs. She boiled teas and honeycombs, steamed open her pores, adjusted the shutters and drank” (García 36). The reader does not know exactly whether she intended to commit suicide or if the potion unwillingly made her ill. However, in the following eight months, she takes to her bed. Celia does not suffer from any specific disease: “[t]he doctors could find nothing wrong with Celia. They examined her through monacles and magnifying glasses, with mental instruments that embossed her chest and forearms, thighs and forehead with a blue geometry” (García 37). Celia stops eating, her body declines and she is close to death. “That she was shrinking there was no doubt. Celia had been a tall woman, a head taller than most men with a full bosom and slender, muscled legs. Soon she was a fragile pole of opaque bones, with yellowed nails and no monthly blood” (García 36). Celia’s body finally recovers, but her psyche remains infected. When she abandons her first born child, Jorge finally admits her to a mental institution.

She is doomed to live her life in sheer acceptance but without fulfilment of her innermost desires. She accepts being separated from Gustavo, “the way I accept my husband and my daughters and my life” (García 97). She grows estranged from the people who, unlike her, can experience joy: “Jorge says my smile frightens him, so I look in the mirror and try on old smiles” (García 100). Instead, she feels a kinship to the outcasts of society: “I get up while it’s

still dark to see the fishermen push their boats into the sea. I think of everyone who might be awake with me – insomniacs, thieves, anarchists, women with children who drowned in their baths. They are my companions” (García 52). In addition, she hears voices, calling her in the night (García 95).

The visual García repeatedly uses to depict Celia’s melancholy and mental illness is the sea. Celia lives at Cuba’s north shore, in the fictitious town Santa Teresa del Mar, which translates as *Saint Teresa by the Sea* – a name that García seems to have picked intentionally, since the sea has a crucial role throughout the book and in Celia’s life. Her house is the town’s primary lookout to the sea. Celia who is most of the time alone, Jorge being away on business, spends most of her time “resting on the porch, as the doctors ordered, and find solace in the patterns of the sea” (García 11). Watching the ocean comforts Celia; it is what keeps her alive, as a santería “told her nearly forty years ago, when she had decided to die: ‘Miss Celia, there’s a wet landscape in your palm.’ And it was true. She had lived all these years by the sea until she knew its every definition of blue” (García 7). In her letters, Celia uses maritime figures to refer to her feelings: she compares her heartache with a fish that swims in her lungs (García 37) and confesses that she wishes she could live underwater (García 49) instead of having to bear all her pain. As Cowart points out, “[h]er affinity with the sea finds its definite expression” (89) in a poem by Lorca that she reads aloud to Javier:

Me he perdido muchas veces por el mar con el oído lleno de flores recién coradas, con la lengua llena de amor y de agonía. Muchas veces me he perdido por el mar, como me pierdo en el corazón de algunos niños.	I have lost myself in the sea many times, with my ear full of freshly cut flowers, with my mouth full of love and agony I have lost myself in the sea many times, as I lost myself in the heart of certain children.
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(García 156/7)

Indeed, Celia is prone to lose herself in the sea. Sometimes, in the middle of the night, she walks into the sea with her clothes on and floats on the waters. When she awakes from her numbness,

she stretches her legs but cannot touch the sandy bottom. Her arms are heavy, sodden as porous wood after a storm. She has lost her shoes. A sudden wave engulfs her, and for a moment Celia is tempted to relax and drop. Instead, she swims clumsily, steadily towards the shore, sunk low like an overladen boat. (García 8)

Celia has a recurrent dream about the tidal wave of 1944, a frequent motif in the novel. The girl in the dream is at once her daughter and “the dreamer herself, who foresees her own surrender to the whelming tide” (Cowart 93).

A young girl in her Sunday dress and patent shoes selects shells along the shore, filling her limitless pockets. The sea retreats to the horizon, underlining the sky in a dark band of blue. Voices call out to the girls but she does not listen. Then the seas rush over her and she floats underwater with wide-open eyes. (García 45)

The sea also represents the distance between Celia and emigrated children. The separation from Javier, Lourdes and Pilar is the second great loss Celia is mourning all her life as she considers the separation of family as a betrayal of their origin. She commiserates that, unlike previous families who “used to stay in one village reliving the same disillusion” and “buried their dead side by side” (García 240), her family was dispersed all over the globe. As she tells Pilar, it was the sea that “made my children restless. It exists now so we can call and wave from opposite shores” (García 240). Only to Pilar, she left the “legacy” of “a love for the sea” (García 176). When Celia finally also loses Ivanito, who escapes from Cuba with Lourdes and Pilar’s help, she goes into the sea and drowns herself:

Celia steps into the ocean and imagines she’s a soldier on a mission – for the moon, or the palms, or El Líder. The water rises quickly around her. It submerges her throat and her nose, her open eyes that do not perceive salt. Her hair floats loosely from her skull and waves above her in the tide. She breathes through her skin, she breathes through her wounds. (García 243)

Similar to the way the sea depresses Celia, also the rain affects her emotionally, especially “unseasonable April rains” (García 1), which she describes as “tyranny” (García 98) for her. April is the month Gustavo leaves her, which is why she always is depressed in April, even years later: “It is April, and I am melancholy, and twenty two years have passed” (García 165). Also in the year when Gustavo left, the month of April was very rainy, adding to her agony: “Celia was inconsolable. The spring rains made her edgy, the greenery hurt her eyes” (García 36). Lourdes, on the contrary, likes April. It’s her favourite month (García 179). This again signals the dichotomous relationship between Lourdes and Celia. It is also in April that Pilar and Lourdes travel to Cuba, spending “Six Days in April”, as pointed out by the title of the last part of the novel.

The rain and the month of April are also connected to death. Once, Celia is at a poetry reading by Federico García Lorca, where it starts to rain heavily, which makes her feel suicidal: “During his presentation, a torrential rainstorm fell and the black sounds of the *duende* shivered in the air with mystery and anguish and death. Death was alluring, seductive, and Celia longed to die in the thrill of it over and over again” (García 95). Moreover, it is in April when Celia finally kills herself.

Blue, the colour of rain and water, is not only used to convey melancholy, but also to symbolise the *un-* and *supernatural*. Celia imagines her recently departed husband to arise from the ocean to visit her after his death:

His blue eyes are like lasers in the night. The beams bounce off his fingernails, five hard blue shields. They scan the beach, illuminating shells and sleeping gulls, then focus on her. The porch turns blue, ultraviolet. Her hands, too, are blue. (García 5)

The hospital’s nurse recounts “blue light” coming from Jorge’s room. She believes that Jorge is a saint, witnessing his resurrection: “He put on his hat, passed through the window, and headed south, leaving a trail of phosphorus along the East-River” (García 19). Also when Lourdes tells her husband of Jorge’s apparition, the colour blue is in present:

Rufino appears, dusted with blue chalk. His fingernails, too, are blue.

“He’s back,” Lourdes whispers hoarsely, peering under the love seats. “He spoke to me tonight when I was walking home from the bakery. I heard Papi’s voice. I smelled his cigar. The street was empty, I swear it.” Lourdes stops. Her chest rises and falls with every breath. Then she leans towards her husband, narrowing her eyes. “Things are wrong, Rufino, very wrong.” (García 65)

The unnaturalness of blue is also linked to disease. Jorge receives cobalt treatment in the hospital, which nine-year-old Pilar imagines as blue beams aiming at her grandfather’s stomach, making her wonder how this could be beneficial for health.

A strange color for healing, I thought. Nothing we eat is blue, not *blue* blue like my grandfather’s eyes, so why didn’t the doctors change the color of those damn beams to green? We eat green it’s healthy. If only they had changed those lights to green, I thought, a nice jade green, he’d have gotten better (García 33).

When Pilar paints Celia’s portrait she uses a lot of blue, so that she soon has “used up most of her blue already, and has to mix in other colors to make it last” (García 230). Just as Pilar is

running out of colour, Celia is running out of life. The fading shades of blue stand for her fading life. For Pilar, blue not only is the colour she connects with her grandmother, but also Cuba's defining colour.

Mostly, though I paint her in blue. Until I returned to Cuba, I never realized how many blues exist. The aquamarines near the shoreline, the azures of deeper waters, the eggshell blue beneath by grandmother's eyes, the fragile indigos tracking her hands. There's a blue, too, in the curves of the palms, and the edges of the words we speak, a blue tinge to the sand and the seashells and the plump gulls on the beach. The mole by Abuela's mouth is also blue, a vanishing blue. (García 233)

In the **TNS**, Ashima and Ashoke have to deal with grief. They learn from the death of their relatives only by telephone or mail: "the members of that other, former life, [...] slowly dwindle. More deaths come, more telephone calls startle them in the middle of the night, more letters arrive in the mailbox informing them of aunts and uncles no longer with them" (Lahiri 63). It is especially hard for them to deal with loss, given the fact that they have no opportunity to say goodbye to them. "Gogol and Sonia are woken by these deaths in the early mornings, their parents screaming on the other side of thin bedroom walls" (Lahiri 63).

Death is very present in the novel. Lahiri draws a comparison between the geographical separation from people and by death:

In some sense Ashoke and Ashima live the lives of the extremely aged, those who survive and are consoled by memory alone. Even those family members who continue to live seem dead somehow, always invisible, impossible to touch. Voices on the phone, occasionally bearing news of births and weddings, send chills down their spines. How could it be, still alive, still talking? (Lahiri 63/4)

When Ashoke starts a job in Cleveland and moves away, visiting only every three weekends, Ashima has to deal with solitude. She is not used to being alone and has never liked it. She feels unsafe and lonely.

At forty-eight she has come to experience the solitude that her husband and son and daughter already know, and which they claim not to mind. "It's not such a big deal," her children tell her. [...] But Ashima feels too old to learn such a skill. She hates returning in the evenings to a dark, empty house, going to sleep on one side of the bed and waking up on another. [...] In spite of the security system she would sit up startled in the middle of the night by a sound somewhere in the house. (Lahiri 161)

Ashima does not know what to do with her time. At first she occupies herself with wildly “cleaning out closets and scrubbing the insides of kitchen cupboards and scraping the shelves of the refrigerator, rinsing out the vegetable bins” (Lahiri 161), then she stops caring about housekeeping at all, since there is no one there who cares about it. “She no longer dusts, or notices dust, for that matter” (Lahiri 162). She also stops cooking elaborate meals. Instead she “eats on the sofa, in front of the television, simple meals of buttered toast and dal, a single pot lasting her a week and an omelette to go with it if she has energy to bother. Sometimes she eats the way Gogol and Sonia do when they visit, standing in front of the refrigerator, not bothering to heat up the food in the oven or to put it on a plate” (Lahiri 162). She passes her time making Christmas cards, for “[s]he has time to do things like this now that she is alone. Now that there is no one to feed or entertain or talk to for weeks at a time” (Lahiri 161). The rest of the time, she is lonely and bored. “Sometimes, not knowing what to do with herself after dinner, she is already in bed by then, in her nightgown, watching the small black-and-white television” (Lahiri 162).

She misses Gogol whom she hardly speaks to or sees, for he spends most of his time at his girlfriend’s house. Ashima looks forward to times when the whole family gets together, which happens only very infrequently. Even on holidays, her children do not regularly visit. “It still bothers her that neither Gogol nor Sonia had come home for Thanksgiving this year” (Lahiri 166). When Ashoke dies, however, Sonia moves back in with Ashima and Gogol starts visiting every weekend.

Another character in TNS, Moushumi, also suffers a loss that afflicts her severely. She breaks up with her fiancée only shortly before her wedding, because she finds out that he has been lying to her. She overhears him complaining about her family. This betrayal hurts her so deeply that she breaks off the wedding.

To her surprise, he was complaining about it, commenting that he found it taxing, found the culture repressed. All they did was visit her relatives, he said. Though he thought the city was fascination, the society, in his opinion, was somewhat provincial. People tended to stay at home most of the time. There was nothing to drink. [...] For it was one thing for her to reject her background, to be critical of her family’s heritage, another to hear it from him. She realized that he had fooled everyone, including her. (Lahiri 217)

Her breakup upsets her so much that she tries to commit suicide and is referred to a therapist (Lahiri 217). It takes her half a year to recover from her depression, in which she distracts

herself from her pain by going “to the movies by herself, sometimes as many as three a day” and watching television “planning her nights around her favourite shows” (Lahiri 218).

6.5.3 Homesickness/ nostalgia

Immigrant’s homesickness sometimes can be very strong, so that the afflicted show symptoms of depression and find it hard to go on with their lives in the new country. This is the case with Rufino, one of **DC**’s protagonists. What is especially difficult for him is the adaption to urban living, since he is used to a farmer’s life.

It became clear to Lourdes shortly after she and Rufino moved to New York that he would never adapt. Something came unhinged in his brain that would make him incapable of working in a conventional way. There was a part of him that could never leave the *finca* or the comfort of its cycles, and this diminishes him from any other life. He could not be transplanted. (García 129)

He does not establish any friendships and also his wife grows alien to him. Besides his workshop, there is no place for him where he does not get “depressed or crazy” (García 138). The only sanctuary are his memories. “Dad only looks alive when he talks about the past, about Cuba” (García 138).

Interestingly, also Pilar suffers from a kind of homesickness. Even though she grew up in America, she perceives herself to be a stranger in her own land and experiences a “profound and perpetual sense of cultural un-belonging” (O’Reilly Herrera 189). However, the home she believes to be missing, she does not know. It only exists in the memory she claims to still have from her first two years of her life that she spent in Cuba: “I was only two years old when I left Cuba but I remember everything that’s happened to me since I was a baby, even word-for-word conversations” (García 26). According to her memory, she was taken away from her grandmother against her will and forced to be leaving the country with her mother. Pilar recalls that her “[m]om tried to pull me away but I clung to Abuela and screamed at the top of my lungs. My grandfather came running and said, ‘Celia, let the girl go. She belongs with Lourdes.’ That was the last time I saw her” (García 26). As a consequence, “*nostalgia* emerges as a desire to reconnect with the original objects of memory’s gaze [emphasis added]” (Dalleo and Saéz 118). This nostalgia rests deep inside Pilar, so that “every once in a while a wave of longing will hit me and it’s all I can do not to hijack a plane to Havana or something” (García 138). Pilar’s flight to Miami at thirteen is an expression of this longing.

Other than her father's homesickness, Pilar's nostalgia is a product of "a second-hand sense of displacement" (O'Reilly Herrera 187) and inherited exile. Since she has no first-time experience of Cuba, she naturally romanticises the island and her grandmother with whom she associates it. Due to a lack of other sources, nostalgia and her creative imagination inform Pilar's memory: "Every day Cuba fades a little more inside me, my grandmother fades a little more inside me. And there's only my imagination where our history should be" (García 38).

As Bhabha states, "[w]hen historical visibility has faded, when the present tense of testimony loses its power to arrest, then the displacements of *memory* and the indirections of *art* offer us the image of our psychic survival [emphasis added]" (Bhabha 1994, 26/27). Therefore, García endows her heroine with artistic skill, but also with the ability to communicate telepathically with her grandmother and the ability to remember her earliest childhood. This, and other of the novel's features of *magical realism* (see Ch. 5.7.4) are "born out of the struggle to articulate" (Coward 91) the past.

TNS' Ashima also suffers from homesickness. In contrast to Ashoke, she does not migrate because of her own decision. When her parents choose Ashoke, who "has been living abroad for two years [...] earning a Ph.D. in Boston" (Lahiri 9), her destiny is sealed. When Ashima is asked "whether she was willing to fly on a plane and then if she was capable of living in a city characterized by severe, snowy winters, alone" (Lahiri 9), no answer follows, which indicates that the question was only rhetorical and that she was never meant to make this decision. As typical for an arranged marriage, Ashima does not get to know Ashoke before they stand before the altar: "It was only after the betrothal that she'd learned his name. One week later the invitations were printed, and two weeks after that she was adorned and adjusted by countless aunts, countless cousins hovering around her" (Lahiri 9). It is, thus, almost a stranger, with whom she has to leave her country and her family, everything that is familiar to her.

In the USA, nothing is like Ashima has imagined her life to be like.

It is not all what she had expected. Not at all like the houses in *Gone With the Wind* or *The Seven-Year Itch*, movies she'd seen with her brother and cousins at the Lighthouse and the Metro. The apartment is drafty during winter, and in summer, intolerably hot. The thick glass windowpanes are covered by dreary dark brown curtains. There are even roaches in the bathroom, emerging at night from the cracks in the tiles. (Lahiri 30)

Since Ashoke is at the university all day long, she sits alone in their small, unfurnished apartment, left with having to do the laundry, cleaning and cooking. She has to accept that in America, they are not wealthy, do not have servants who keep the household and cannot afford to live in a pleasant house.

Until now, Ashima has accepted that there is no one to sweep the floor, or does the dishes, or washes clothes, or shop for groceries, or prepare meals 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 32/3)

Moreover, she strongly misses her family. She keeps their letters and re-reads them whenever she feels lonely. Even after years, when her parents have already passed, she holds on to the letters.

She has saved her dead parent's letters on the top shelf of her closet, in a large white purse she used to carry in the seventies until the strap broke. Once a year she dumps the letters onto her bed and goes through them, devoting an entire day to her parents' words, allowing herself a good cry. She revisits her affection and concern, conveyed weekly, faithfully, across continents – all the bits of news that had had nothing to do with her life in Cambridge but which had sustained her in those days nevertheless. (Lahiri 160/1)

Especially difficult for Ashima is the experience of motherhood in a foreign country. During her pregnancy, she suffers from strong morning-sickness and spends days in bed: "Before he left for the university he would leave a cup of tea on the side of the bed, where she lay listless and silent. Often, returning in the evenings, he would find her still lying there, the tea untouched" (Lahiri 11). The experience of motherhood in a foreign country is especially painful for Ashima. When she is back from the hospital where she was surrounded by people, she feels all the more isolated and heavily overwhelmed with having to manage a household and taking care of her new-born alone.

Ashima, on her own with Gogol for the first time in the silent house, suffering from a sleep deprivation far worse than the worst of her jet lag, sits by the three-sided window in the living room on one of the triangular chairs and cries the whole day. She cries as she feeds him, and as she puts him to sleep, and as he cries between sleeping and feeding. She cries after the mailman's visit because there are no letters from Calcutta. She cries when she calls Ashoke at his department and he does not answer. One day she cries when she goes to the kitchen to make dinner and discovers that they've run out of rice. (Lahiri 34)

In her despair she confesses to Ashoke that wants to go back to India:

“I can’t do this,” she tells Ashoke when he brings her a cup of tea, the only thing he can think to do for her, the last thing she feels like drinking. [...]

“What are you saying, Ashima?”

“I’m saying hurry up and finish your degree.” And then, impulsively, admitting it for the first time: “I’m saying I don’t want to raise Gogol alone in this country. It’s not right. I want to go back.” (Lahiri 32/3)

Whereas Ashoke, on the one hand, feels guilty for being responsible for bringing her to America, on the other hand, he is sure that he will stay. “He remembers suddenly about Ghosh, his companion on the train, who had returned from England for his wife’s sake. ‘It is my greatest regret coming back,’ Ghosh had confessed to Ashoke, [...].” (Lahiri 33).

Ashoke’s experience of the migration is different from Ashima’s. First, he is much older than Ashima and is more detached from his parents. Second, he had already spent a year studying in the USA and knows what to expect. Moreover, it was his wish and his decision to migrate, whereas Ashima had to join him. Finally, the migration serves his purpose, to work in his field of sciences. Because he is integrated into the university he does not feel as isolated as Ashima. He regularly meets people and is able to make new contacts. Ashima, on the other hand, spends most of her time inside the apartment.

Ashima’s homesickness slowly diminishes. Although she will never be able to feel completely at home in the US, she manages to overcome her depression. When she has to take care of Gogol, her days start to follow a routine. Instead of suffering, “[s]he begins to pride herself on doing it alone, in devising a routine. Like Ashoke, busy with his teaching and research and dissertation seven days a week, she, too, now has something to occupy her fully, to demand her utmost devotion, her last ounce of strength” (Lahiri 34/5).

A symbol for Ashima’s homesickness and difficulty to arrive in the country that is supposed to be her new home is the watch, “a voyage gift from her parents, slipped over her wrist the last time she saw them, amid airport confusion and tears” (Lahiri 4). The watch symbolically stands for time, an important unity that measures how long she has been away from her family. Moreover, looking at the watch reminds Ashima of her family and conserves important memories of home that help her in times of pain. In the hospital when she is in labour and instructed to time the duration of her contractions, for example, Ashima looks at her watch, and is instantly transferred back to India:

She calculates the Indian time on her hands. The tip of her thumb strikes each rung of the brown ladders etched onto the backs of her fingers, then stops at the middle of the third: it is nine and a half hours ahead in Calcutta, already evening, half past eight. In the kitchen of her parents' flat on Amherst Street at this very moment, a servant is pouring after-dinner tea into streaming glasses, arranging Marie biscuits on a tray. Her mother, her very soon to be a grandmother, is standing at the mirror of her dressing table, untangling waist-length hair, still more black than grey, with her fingers. Her father hunches over his slanted ink-stained table by the window, sketching, smoking, listening to the Voice of America. Her younger brother, Rana, studies for a physics exam on the bed. She pictures clearly the grey cement floor of her parent's sitting room, feels its solid chill underfoot even on the hottest day. (Lahiri 4/5)

The thoughts of her family clam her so much that "[f]or an instant the weight of the baby vanishes, replaced by the scene that passes before her eyes" (Lahiri 5).

6.6 Language

Language is undeniably connected to identity. The language we speak is a result of our cultural and social background. Not only the vocabulary, but also pragmatic and socio-linguistic conventions are part of language. Hence, the better someone's language skills are, the better they can understand other people's subtexts and get their own subtexts across. Language, therefore, is closely connected to power.

6.6.1 Cultural implications of language

The main characters in **DC** are bilingual, speaking English and Spanish. The choice of which language to use in which context signals which parts of their selves are connected to either Spanish or English. They need both languages because each language has particularities, making it impossible to translate meaning verbally, as Mai declares: "Translations just confuse it, dilute it, like words going from Spanish to English" (García 59). Pilar is especially "sensitive to verbal nuances" (Coward 90) of languages. For her, Spanish has an emotionality that, in English, is unable to convey. Thus, to express strong feelings, either very negative or very positive ones, Spanish has more force than English: "I envy my mother her Spanish curses sometimes [Sic.]. They make my English collapse in a heap" (García 59). Likewise, her Peruvian boyfriend and she "speak in Spanish when we make love. English seems an impossible language for intimacy" (García 180).

García, faithful to her character's opinion that not everything in a language can be translated, uses a number of Spanish words in her narrative. She uses this in three ways: First, she substitutes some sayings, short phrases or forms of addressing people with the Spanish equivalent: *comañero/-a* (4, 114), *Por dios* (12), *Bienvenida* (13), *mi corazon* (40), *quicito*⁴ (46). *Asi, asi* (59), *hombre* (60), *mi hijo/-a* (64, 73, 88, 95, ...), *mi cielo*⁵ (65, 143, ...), *tía* (94), *Vámonos, vámonos !* (105), *chico* (109), *Mamá* (122). Also in the letters, Celia uses the Spanish forms of address: e.g. "*Querido Gustavo*"⁶ and "*Tu Celia*" (97). Second, she leaves some special Cuban words, e.g. names of foods, in the Spanish original. Although the words are translatable, they are used like technical terms and thus are adopted without alteration: *gusano*⁷ traitors (3), the *yanquis*⁸ (3), *El Líder* (3), *santero/-a*⁹ (7, 14, 37), *La madrina* (13), *botánicas* (36), *gitanas*¹⁰ (36), *machetero*¹¹ (44), the *danzon* and the *guaracha*¹² (78), *arroz con pollo*¹³ (87), *guayabera*¹⁴ (89), *bohío*¹⁵ (92), *latifundios* (92), *duende*¹⁶ (95), *Irakere jazz*¹⁷ (124), *novelas* (32, 130). Third, when explicit events where Spanish speakers are involved are recounted, very often in direct or reported speech, García sticks with the Spanish words: "For her father, conquering the *microbios* required unflagging vigilance" (22), "she called me a *desgraciada*"¹⁸ (27), "they called me *brujita*, little witch" (28), "her beauty mark, the *lunar* by her mouth" (36), "Abuela is complaining that there was too much salt in the *ropa vieja*"¹⁹ (61), "Today, they'd be thrown in a Social Disgrace Unit with drug addicts and *maricones*"²⁰ (109), "She called me a *puta*"²¹ (113), "The caption on the back said 'Cuba ... *alegre como su sol*'"²² (123), "She is an *artista*!" (144).

⁴ Pet name, literally "little one"

⁵ Pet name, literally "my heaven"

⁶ "Dear Gustavo"

⁷ literally "worm", also means: right wing, counter-revolutionary, reactionary, sell-out, neo-fascist, traitor (see Urban Dictionary)

⁸ "Yankees", synonym for "American"

⁹ Priest of the Santería cult

¹⁰ "Gypsy"

¹¹ Man carrying a machete or bushwhacker

¹² Typical Latin-American dances

¹³ Literally "Rice with chicken", typical dish in Latin America

¹⁴ Traditional Latin American garment

¹⁵ Hut made of straw, wood or canes (see Word Reference)

¹⁶ Spirit, magical creature, elf, goblin (see Word Reference)

¹⁷ Musical style combining jazz, classical music, rock music and traditional Afro-Cuban music (see Global Jazz Academy)

¹⁸ wretch

¹⁹ Literally "old clothes", here: Typical Cuban dish, kind of beef stew (see Goya)

²⁰ Slang word, literally "fag"

²¹ Slang word, literally "bitch, whore"

²² "Cuba ... as happy as its sun"

Language also indicates belonging between people and nations with the same mother tongue. Davis states that language in DC functions

as a measuring device for gauging both, connection and separation, loyalty and abandonment, between families and land. The languages each learns, speaks and passes on illustrate diverse attachments, just as the lack of a common language signals the severance of a bond. (64)

Lourdes, who embraces the American culture and with it the country's language, "welcomes her adopted language, its possibilities for reinvention" (García 73). Although she still speaks Spanish, after more than roughly two decades in America, she has lost the ability to understand and be understood by the Cubans. This becomes evident during Lourdes and Pilar's trip back to the island, where she unsuccessfully lectures the Cubans she encounters: "I [Pilar] pull my mother from the growing crowd. The language she speaks is lost to them. It's another idiom entirely" (García 221). As the title suggests, the language spoken in Cuba is not simply Spanish but *Cuban*. As Cowart points out, a language is "a system of symbolic representation" that is not constituted simply by a shared grammar and lexicon, but by "the characteristic gestures and mores of any and every distinctive culture. It is one thing to speak English or Spanish, another to know 'American' or 'Cuban'" (92).

Also Pilar's Spanish appears to be not *Cuban*, at least according to her grandmother. "Pilar, her first grandchild, writes to her from Brooklyn in a Spanish that is not hers. She speaks the hard-edged lexicon of bygone tourists itchy to throw dice on green felt or asphalt" (García 7). Pilar's lack of adequate language skill, not being able to speak Spanish like a Cuban, positions her among the outsiders of the Cuban community. Only when she returns to Cuba, she acquires the island's language in a way that is more authentic. The integration of the language into her identity is evident by the fact that she starts dreaming in Spanish – or more adequately *dreaming in Cuban*.

In **MB**, the issue of language for immigrants is a very prominent topic. Whereas Thanh has difficulty of acquiring English, a language that is completely exotic to her, Mai, given the fact that she was much younger when she came to the US, the learning of the new language facilitated the adaptation process in the new country. For Mai, the many new and unaccustomed things America swamps her with, turn out not to be only overwhelming and frightening, but also exciting and motivational. Learning English is not a burden to her but, on the contrary, enrichment. She discovers a hidden talent and passion for the English language.

Exploring new words and refining her pronunciation becomes an all-consuming hobby and paves the way of her educational goal to be admitted to Mount Holyoake College where she is praised for sounding “just like an American” (Cao 127) in the admission interview.

Mai discovered her enthusiasm for English already in the first weeks she was living in the US, when she stayed with Michael and Mary MacMahon in Farmington:

I followed Aunt Mary around the house, collecting words like a beggar gathering rain with an earthen pan. She opened her mouth, and out came a constellation of gorgeous sounds. Each word she uttered was a round stone, with the smoothness of something that had been rubbed and polished by the waves of a warm summer beach. She could swim straight through her syllables. [...] Together, she and I sketched the English language, its curious cadence and rhythm, into the receptive Farmington landscape. Only with Aunt Mary and Uncle Michael could I give myself an inheritance my parents never gave me, the gift of language. The story of English was nothing less than the poetry of sound and motion. (Cao 36)

With her gradual adaptation of English as her first language, Mai simultaneously adopts an American identity. When she moves to her mother who, in the meantime, also has entered the country, Mai “was no longer the same person she used to know” (Cao 37), but already partly American. Mai equates her language skill with her “ability to decipher the nuances of American life” (Cao 37).

In the context of MB, language also functions as a “vehicle of introjection - the means by which the void is filled and the loss made communal” (Stocks 86). For Mai, language has the potential for reinvention and liberation from her parents’ burdened history. Mai acknowledges this opportunity language holds for her: “This was my realization: we have to let one thing go – the language we think in, or the composition of our dream, the grass roots clinging underneath its rocks – and all at once everything goes” (Cao 36).

Whereas English stands for Mai’s chances to move on in life, Vietnamese represents the contrary: as Thanh reminds her daughter, the “verbs in our language are not conjugated, because our sense of time is tenseless, indivisible and knows no end” (Cao 252). In this sense, “Vietnamese [...] functions as a *linguistic form of karma* that offers no potential for real closure since loss cannot be consigned to the past [emphasis added]” (Stocks 86). Thus, Mai can only distance herself linguistically from her past, but she cannot overcome it. Also in other parts of the Vietnamese language, the culture’s belief in karma is manifest, as Mai explains that “in fact, the Vietnamese word for ‘please’, as in ‘could you please’, means

literally ‘to make good karma’. ‘Could you please pass the butter’ becomes ‘Please make good karma and pass me the butter’” (Cao 34).

TNS shows how the first generation of immigrants struggles with the stigmatism of having a foreign accent. Even though Ashima comes to the US with already high English proficiency, she is still distressed by conversations with Americans, always afraid of making an error. She fears the people’s judgement when they are reminded of her foreignness.

“Hoping for a boy or a girl?” Petty asks.

“As long as there are ten finger and ten toe,” Ashima replies. [...]

Patty smiles a little too widely, and suddenly Ashima realizes her error, knows she should have said “fingers” and “toes.” This error pains her almost as much as her last contraction. English had been her subject. In Calcutta, before she was married, she was working toward a college degree. She used to tutor neighbourhood schoolchildren in their homes, on their verandas and beds, helping them to memorize Tennyson and Wordsworth, to pronounce words like *sign* and *cough*, to understand the difference between Aristotelian and Shakespearean tragedy. But in Bengali, a finger can also mean fingers, a toe toes. (Lahiri 7)

This scene shows how complex it is to master a foreign language, and how stressful the constant risks of being exposed as first-generation immigrant who has not fully assimilated yet, can be. Gogol soon recognises how “in stores, of cashiers smirking at his parent’s accents, and of salesmen who prefer to direct their conversation to Gogol, as though his parents were neither incompetent nor deaf” (Lahiri 67/8).

Whereas Ashoke and Ashima still bear the stigma of their Indian accent, Gogol and Sonia speak English like native speakers. They also know Bengali, the language that they use when speaking to their parents and when they visit the Bengali language and culture lessons (Lahiri 65) to which their parents sent them. Still, in India, their language reminds their family members of their otherness. “On trips to India his American-accented English is a source of endless amusement to his relatives, and when he and Sonia speak to each other, aunts and uncles and cousins always shake their heads in disbelief and say, ‘I didn’t understand a word!’” (Lahiri 118) Even their parents are frequently unsettled by the fact “that their children sound just like Americans, expertly conversing in a language that still at times confounds them, in accents they are accustomed not to trust” (Lahiri 65). The hierarchy of Gogol’s languages indicates his closeness to the American culture, on the one hand, and his distance to the Indian culture, on the other hand.

By interweaving Bengali words into the narrative, Lahiri leaves traces of Gogol's Bengali culture in the text: e.g.: "*daknam*²³" (25), "*bhalonam*²⁴," (26), "Pujo²⁵ money" (12), "Sahib²⁶" (25), "annaprasan²⁷" (38), "pajama-punjabi²⁸" (39) and "rossogollas²⁹" (82).

6.6.2 Language as power

For immigrants, knowing the language of their country of residence is essential. Without it, they are unable to establish an autonomous life. DC's Pilar, for example, remembers how she almost became a child star, when a man spotted her in the park and wanted to cast her for the Art Linkletter show. Once he noticed that she could not speak any English, she was not taken (García 32).

Ironically, later when the Puente family has already adapted to the English language, Lourdes herself takes advantage of the newer immigrants' lack of language skills. She knows that she can exploit them, since they cannot speak English and are desperate for work. "She hires the real down-and-outs, immigrants from Russia, people who don't speak any English, figuring she can get them cheap. Then she screams at them half the day because they don't understand what she's saying" (García 32).

Language skills are not only important to protect oneself from being defrauded, they also empower to defraud or manipulate others. For Lourdes' habit of readjusting the truth and converting it into "good stories", language is an instrument to add profoundness to her tales. Pilar points out how "her English, her immigrant English, has a touch of otherness that makes [her embellishments and half-truths] unintentionally precise" (García 177).

The concept of re-writing history is a recurring motif in DC. The remembered truths of the characters diverge from each other; fact and fiction are constantly mingled. Since Pilar is the one who is aware of that fact, the reader seems to be safe assuming that she is the reliable narrator in this novel, whereas Lourdes voice is unreliable. However, often, the fictionalised

²³ Pet name, literally: "the name by which one is called, by friends, family, and other intimates, at home and in other private, unguarded moments" (Lahiri 26)

²⁴ Good name, name "for identification in the outside world" (Lahiri 26)

²⁵ Money that is meant to be spent for a religious purpose (see Vocab)

²⁶ Used formerly as a form of respectful address for a European man in colonial India (see American Heritage Dictionary)

²⁷ "Rice party", traditional festivity where an infant is fed rice for the first time (Lahiri 38)

²⁸ a pair of loose trousers tied by a drawstring around the waist; worn by men and women in some Asian countries (see Shabadkosh)

²⁹ Traditional Bengali sweet dish (see Singh)

version of events is told over and over again, until it is believed to be truth, even by the teller of the story.

This is a constant struggle around my mother, who systematically rewrites history to suit her views of the world. This reshaping of events happens in a dozen ways every day, contesting reality. It's not a matter of premeditated deception. Mom truly believes that her version of events is correct, down to details that I know, for a fact, are wrong. To this day, my mother insists that I ran away from her at the Miami airport after we first left Cuba. But it was she who turned and ran when she thought she heard my father's voice. I wandered around lost until a pilot took me to his airline's office and gave me a lollipop. (García 176)

Pilar's bright mind makes her realise why her mother bends the truth, and shows sympathy for her mother's compulsion to lie: "Maybe in the end the facts are not as important as the underlying truth she wants to convey. Telling her own truth is *the* truth to her, even if it's at the expense of chipping away our past" (García 177). The superiority of truth over memory is also seen critically by Andrea O'Reilly Herrera, who argues that "each account or interpretation of the past, each individual memory [...] has its own intrinsic value, yet none can be read in a vacuum, for they always constitute a part of a larger dynamic" (195).

MB's Mai discovers that her bilingualism kept an astonishing power. Within the Vietnamese community, she assumed "the right to stand guard over language and the right to claim unadulterated authority" (Cao 37) by becoming their cultural translator: "For my mother and her Vietnamese neighbours, I became the keeper of the word, the only one with access to the light-world. Like Adam, I had the God-given right to name all the fowls of the air and all the beasts of the field" (Cao 37).

Mai enjoys her power as translator. She frequently "cheats" when she is asked to translate something, for "the ease with which [she] could fabricate wholly new plot lines from T.V. made the temptation to invent especially difficult to resist" (Cao 38). However, Mai's creative impulse to make semantic alterations in her renderings of the original does not make her a bad translator. On the contrary, she "does not lose anything in translation" but "invests her translations with new meaning and relevance" (Stocks 87).

Her expertise in both American and Vietnamese culture makes it possible for Mai to negotiate the cultural gap between the two. Her translations are more than exact renderings of words. Instead, she "subscribes to more recent theories of translating that recognize the difficulty in surmounting cultural as well as linguistic disparities" (Stocks 88). When Mai is asked by her

mother to talk the building manager of their house into letting them change their apartment which she believes is cursed, she instructs her daughter to “tell him we can put several mirrors up to deflect the curse in his direction if he doesn’t do something quick” (Cao 21). Mai, who knows that the building manager will “think I’m crazy” (Cao 21) relies on her cultural skills – applying her “New World tricks” (Cao 21) - to get her mother what she wants. Besides concentrating on using her clearest English, one of these tricks is to make use of psychology, which Uncle Michal had told her was “the new American religion” (Cao 22). Thus, instead of reasoning her request for changing the apartment with a curse, but with “a phobia” her mother supposedly has of the snakes which, she tells the building manager, were living in the old apartment’s toilet. Moreover, she appeals to the manager’s vanity, telling him “she [her mother]’s sure you can help us, because you’re the manager” (Cao 23).

Stocks suggests a connection between the novel’s title and Mai’s role as translator, since she “is able to use her knowledge of American culture to effortlessly *bridge* the distance between Thanh and the manager without alerting either of them to her manipulation [emphasis added]” (87).

6.6.3 Recording history

DC’s Pilar knows the power language can have also in other forms of recording of history. She is well aware of the “truths hidden within the metaphors and constructedness of language” (Davis 65). She realises that history is a “subjective narrative process” (Dalleo and Machado Saéz 119) and complains about the selectiveness of history books, which contain “one damn battle after another” and confirms that

[i]f it were up to me, I’d record other things, like the time there was a freak hailstorm in the Congo and the women took it as a sign that they should rule. Or the life stories of prostitutes in Bombay. Why don’t I know anything about them? Who chooses what we should know or what’s important? (García 28)

Equipped with her grandmother’s legacy, the “appreciation for words”, and more importantly, the “sympathy for the underdog and a disregard for borders” (García 176), Pilar is perfect for upholding Celia’s mission to record the family history and provide an alternative to the “dominant historical narrative” (Dalleo and Machado Saéz 118). Celia starts this project on November 11, 1934, when she writes her first letter to Gustavo. For the following twenty-five years, on the eleventh of each month, she writes another letter, none of which she ever sends.

Thereby the letters take on the function of a diary, in which her feelings and thoughts and ordinary as well as extraordinary events are recorded. The reason she gives for why she writes the letters is simply “because I *must* [emphasis added]” (García 97).

In the last letter, written on January 11, 1959, she passes the charge on to her newly born granddaughter Pilar when she writes: “My granddaughter, Pilar Puente del Pino, was born today [...]. I will no longer write to you, *mi amor*. She will remember everything” (García 245). And indeed, Pilar is endowed with the gift to remember her life as far back as her first year. She understands her mission also without being told so explicitly by her grandmother, stating that “[e]ven in silence she gives me the confidence to do what I believe is right, to trust my own perceptions (García 176).

When Pilar visits Cuba, Celia’s first words to her are “I’m glad you remember, Pilar. I always know you would” (García 218). It is as if she has already known that her own children will not live long enough (Javier and Felicia) or not like (Lourdes) to keep alive her memory and that Pilar is her only salvation, when she tells her: “Women who outlive their daughters are orphans, [...]. Only their granddaughters can save them, guard their knowledge like the first fire” (García 222).

García’s metafictional device of splitting the first-person narrative between Celia’s and Pilar’s is an effective strategy, because it “suggests the continuance of the female line and the narrative becomes the vehicle through which the wounds are healed and the pain of exile overcome” (Davis 64).

García reflects the relationship between imagination, memory and truth further (Cowart 94), by alluding to the illusiveness of photographs. As the setting where Celia and Gustavo shall meet, García chooses a camera store: “She was selling American photographic equipment at El Encanto, Havana’s most prestigious department store, when Gustavo Sierra de Armas strode up to her display case and asked to see Kodak’s smallest camera” (García 35). This location is not accidental; it is significant on two levels: First, the store is called *El Encanto*, which means *enchantment* or *bedazzlement* in English, suggesting that photographs can be quite deceiving. Second, cameras capture memories, all that Celia will keep from the encounter:

Memory cannot be confined, Celia realises, looking out the kitchen window to the sea. Its slate grey, the color of undeveloped film. Capturing images suddenly seems to her

an act of cruelty. It was an atrocity to sell cameras at El Encanto department store, to imprison emotions on squares of glossy paper. (García 48)

On the other hand, photographs can also be cruel because they bluntly capture the truth of a moment and will always remind the viewer of this moment. Pilar who finds pictures of her grandmother is able to detect this truth of the moment.

I have a trick to tell someone's public face from their private one. If the person is left-handed, like Abuela Celia, the right side of her face betrays her true feelings. I place a finger over the left side of my grandmother's face, and in photograph after photograph I saw the truth. (García 176)

Also **MB** deals with the topic of recording history, or more accurately: *forgetting* history. The war refugees stranded in Virginia's Little Saigon are a people that came with nothing, some not even with an identity, since their identification papers had been destroyed. In America, they are nothing more than phantoms, "a ragtag accumulation of unwanted, an awkward reminder of a war the whole country was trying to forget" (Cao 15). The positive effect of their invisibility in America is that it is fairly easy for them to produce a new identity. In an effort to leave behind their "troubling pasts and disturbing histories, the refugees resort to fabrications, evasion, and mythologization" (Stocks 86). Mai describes the hope that a new beginning and a new identity holds for the immigrants: "There was after all, something awesome about a truly uncluttered beginning, the complete absence of identity, of history. [...] Not only could we become anything we wanted to be in America, we could change what we were in Vietnam" (Cao 41). Quite ironically, Mai refers to this practice of forging identity as the "Vietnamese version of the American Dream" (Cao 40), being able to remain in the old world by forming the Little Saigon community but at the same time broken off from the old personalities that they once inhabited in the real Saigon.

Mrs Bay, Thanh's closest friend and neighbour, for example, gives herself a new birthday when she applied for her social security card (Cao 40). The reason was that she did not like the fact that her actual birthday was in the Year of the Rat. So, she simply made herself two years younger and became a Tiger.

Pilar, as an "outsider with inside information" (Cao 212) uncovers that the "rebirth" and "reinvention" offered by migration are just "fancy euphemisms for half-truths and outright lies" (Cao 124) and that, in fact, the inhabitants of Little Saigon cannot escape their history.

6.7 Belief

Belief is culture specific. Various cultures have different religions, traditions, myths and rituals they perform. In all cultures, however, beliefs have the same function for the individual. People believe in order to give their lives purpose and an explanation for the things they cannot explain otherwise. Furthermore, the rules of religion or tradition provide guidance and structure to their lives. People also turn to spirits or gods to predict the future or ask for advice, protection or healing.

6.7.1 Provides purpose and explanation

Not all of the characters of the three novels believe in some kind of religion or god. Celia and Pilar in **DC**, for example, refer to themselves as atheists (García 58). Instead of believing that everything that happens for a reason, they see the course of time as a result of historical dynamics. They do not believe in a higher being that steers the world, but *history*.

When she asks herself why she has failed to keep her family together, she does not blame the gods, but she blames history. After all, it is due to political events that her Lourdes and Javier left Cuba. Lourdes, because she rejected communism, and Javier because he did not, which was the reason why Jorge did not tolerate him in his house. Pilar also positions herself on the communist side, however, relativises her opinion during her stay in Cuba, after having gained first-hand experience of life in a communist country. She stands in-between the two views, just like she stands between America and Cuba, her mother and her grandmother. The fate of Cuba is the fate of the del Pino family. They are split between communists and capitalists. Celia reflects on this very thought:

What unknown covenants led her ultimately to this beach and this hour and this solitude?

She considers the vagaries of sports, the happenstance of El Líder, a star pitcher in his youth, narrowly missing a baseball career in America. His wicked curveball attracted the major-league scouts, and the Washington Senators were interested in signing him but changed their minds. Frustrated, El Líder went home, rested his pitching arm, and started a revolution in the mountains. Because of this, Celia thinks, her husband will be buried in stiff, foreign earth. Because of this, their children and their grandchildren are nomads. (García 6/7)

The majority of people in Vietnam are Buddhists, including **MB**'s protagonist Thanh Nguyen. She believes in karma, the idea that everything happens as a result of the dynamics of cause

and effect. Karma spans over generations as it is inherited like an “ethical, spiritual chromosome, an amalgamation of parent and child, which is as much part of our history as the DNA strands” (García 170). A person’s fate is, therefore, not only determined by one’s individual actions, but by the actions of the ancestors. According to Thanh “karma means that there’s always going to be something you’ll have to inherit” (Cao 20). Thanh’s strict belief in karma provides her with an explanation for the hardships of her life.

Karma also gives an explanation for the five miscarriages Thanh has before Mai is born. Whereas her mother believes that she was cursed, Thanh “knew even then that it was not an evil spirit but my own fears that had turned all my children into a collapsed mass of cells to be expelled from the body of their mother. I knew deep in the bones of my bones that it was my own unhappy heart [...] that had killed all my babies” (Cao 236). She wants to spare her children this unhappiness and wants to prevent them from inheriting the bad karma of their family. It is her fear of the “family history of sin, revenge, and murder and the imprint it creates in our children’s lives as it rips through one generation and tears apart the next” (Cao 253), that makes her babies die. Thanh feels “as if I had to save their souls from the fate that would surely be theirs if they were to become my children” (Cao 237).

She believes that Mai, as the only one of her children to survive, must be a “miracle baby” for “hanging on to your mother’s womb until the very last moment, to be born to me at an age when I didn’t think I would be pregnant again, overwhelming my will with yours the way you still do” (Cao 237). For Thanh, this is a sign that Mai might be able to break the cycle of bad karma and gives her hope that her daughter will enjoy “a different inheritance, an unburdened past, the seductive powers of an American future” (Cao 254). In an attempt to protect Pilar from any karmic influence, she keeps the past secret from her. Instead of the truth, Pilar is told mythological stories about her grandfather Baba Quan and the events in the war. In this, Cao demonstrates “how myth is used to obscure historical realities” (Stocks 85).

Also Mai, who is not a strict believer in her mother’s doctrines, ridicules the rituals and spells her mother performs, and the superstitions she believes in, feels the inevitable connectedness between her mother’s fate and her own. She, too, uses karma as explanation for simple facts, for example, her anxiety issues: “I blame my mother for my flawed eye. [...] My mother was my karma, her eye my inheritance. Through that eye I could see nothing but danger [...]” (Cao 20).

In **TNS**, religion does not provide any explanations for the cause of events. For Gogol, his “family’s life feels like a string of accidents, unforeseen, unintended, one incident begetting another” (Lahiri 286). Similarly to Mai, Gogol knows that his life is influenced by his parents’ history: “his father’s train wreck, paralyzing him at first, later inspiring him to move as far as possible, to make a new life on the other side of the world” and “the disappearance of the name Gogol’s great-grandmother had chosen for him, lost in the mail somewhere between Calcutta and Cambridge” that had led “to the accident of his being named Gogol, defining and distressing him for so many years” (Lahiri 286/7). Even though he does not believe in karma, despite his effort to “correct that randomness”, he has to accept that “it had not been possible to reinvent himself fully, to break from that mismatched name” (Lahiri 287). However, also with the burden of his parents’ mistakes, he can make his own way, realising that “these events have formed Gogol, shaped him, determined who he is” (Lahiri 287).

Gogol’s disbelief in a greater cause of events, his father’s death, which he refers to as “the worst accident of all” (Lahiri 287), is especially hard for him to accept: “There were things for which it was impossible to prepare but which one spent a lifetime looking back at, trying to accept, interpret, comprehend. Things that should never have happened, that seemed out of place and wrong, these were what prevailed, what endured, in the end” (Lahiri 287).

Lahiri employs the same sense of the world, that things are unchangeable and yet causeless, as Nikolai Gogol in the “The Overcoat”. She borrows the author’s introductory sentence, using it as direct quotation at the opening of her novel: “The reader should realize himself that it could not have happened otherwise, and that to give him any other name was quite out of the question” (Gogol, qtd. in Lahiri). This way, Nikolai Gogol is not only the namesake for her protagonist, but also the influence for the whole novel itself. A second time, Lahiri refers to “The Overcoat”, comparing Akaky³⁰’s fate with Ashoke’s: “Just as ghost Akaky’s haunted the final pages, so did it haunt a place deep in Ashoke’s soul, shedding light on all that was irrational, all that was inevitable about the world” (14).

6.7.2 Gives guidance and provides structure

One of the important features of religion and traditions is that they provide rules, helping people to structure their life. Especially, in times when people experience something that

³⁰ Protagonist in „The Overcoat“

unsettles them or are confused about something, religious or traditional rituals can be anchors that provide safety and prevent them from losing themselves.

Pilar, for example, although she is the one character in **DC** who does not believe, neither in the Christian, nor the santería religion, decides to perform a ritual hoping it would help her to find clarity in a time in her life where she feels lost and directionless: “I’m not religious but I get the feeling that it’s the simplest rituals, the ones that are integrated with the earth and its seasons, that are the most profound. It makes more sense to me than the more abstract forms of worship” (García 199). She buys herbs and candles at a botánica and performs the ritual as she was instructed to. Even though the exact purpose of the ritual is unknown – except that it has something to do with the shop owner’s cryptic message that she “must finish what [she] began” (García 200) – Pilar arrives at a solution for her problems: “I light my candle. The bath turns a clear green from the herbs. [...] On the ninth day of my baths, I call my mother and tell her we’re going to Cuba” (203).

The prevailing tradition in Vietnam, due to its annexation to China in the early eleventh century, is Confucianism. Also **MB**’s protagonists live according to its principles, the most important of which are honouring of the land and honouring of the family (see Sacred-texts). Baba Quan, as a devoted Confucian believes “in the worship of spirits and the sanctuary of the ancestral land” (Cao 83) has passed on these values to her daughter Thanh. The importance of the ancestors is also manifest in the Vietnamese national myth of the betel nut (Cao 84-86). The betel nut story “asserts that ethnic identity is tied to native lands; therefore one must reside next to ancestors’ graves in order to guard their spirits. [T]he Vietnamese must inhabit the land of their ancestors so that the ancestors’ souls achieve eternal life and regeneration” (Satterlee 139).

Thanh believes in the betel nut story and feels obligated to follow its directives. Thus, when her mother dies, she returns her body to her home Ba Xuyen, the deserted village that was declared a fire-free zone. Since she has to leave her mother’s body, she fails to “perform the proper burial rites” (Stocks 85) and makes bad karma. Also, by leaving Vietnam she cannot keep the betel nut story’s dictates of loyalty to the ancestral land, making it impossible for her soul to find peace: “The soul becomes sad if it is left unattended by its descendants’, Baba Quan explained. ‘The farther we wander from the earth and water of the burial ground, the weaker our ties to our ancestors become, and the separation is not good for the soul’ (Cao 59/60).

Mai, “trapped between cultural paradigms” (Cowart 157), does not have the same sense of duty and obedience toward the eldest as her mother. She does not follow her mother’s advice like her mother used to follow her parents’ advice and, thus, does not receive the same guidance as her. For this, Thanh partly blames herself and partly pities her daughter:

How has it come to this? How have I failed to retrieve my own daughter from the stranger she has become?

During our old, haunted nights by the mango grove, we had our routines, games of emperor and peasant I hoped my daughter would learn to appreciate and play. [...] All my daughter’s life, I have played the part of this peasant, pointing my magic finger so my daughter will know which route to follow [...]. But my daughter no longer watches or listens to me. Because I am no longer the guide she looks to for her voyage across the chess board [...].” (Cao 57/8)

All cultures have rituals of how to deal with death. In **TNS**, the reader learns about the Bengali tradition of mourning the dead:

He remembers when his paternal grandfather died, sometime in the seventies, remembers his mother screaming when she walked in on his father, who was shaving off all his hair with a disposable razor. In the process his scalp had bled in numerous places, and for weeks he had worn a cap to work to hide the scabs. “Stop it, you’re hurting yourself,” his mother had said. His father had shut the door, and locked it, and emerged shrunken and bald. Years later Gogol had learned the significance, that it was a Bengali son’s duty to shave his head in the wake of a parent’s death. But at the time Gogol was too young to understand when the bathroom door opened he had laughed at the sight of his hairless, grief-stricken father, and Sonia, just a baby, had cried. (Lahiri 179)

Gogol, who used to be living a life apart from his parents with no adherence to the Bengali traditions, returns to his roots after he learns about his father’s death. He grieves according to Bengali traditions, which proves to be very effective for him. In addition to shaving his head, for ten days he eats a mourner’s diet, consisting of rice, dal and vegetables, and forgoes meat and fish (Lahiri 180). Gogol remembers that, when he was younger and his parents had forced him to do the same thing when his grandparents died, he was “bored by it, annoyed at having to observe a ritual no one else he knew followed, in honor of people he had seen only a few times in his life” (Lahiri 181). At the mourning of his own father’s death, however, he finds comfort in this ritual, referring to it as the “only thing that seems to make some sense” (Lahiri 181).

Without articulating it to one another, they draw comfort from the fact that it is the only time in the day that they are alone, isolated as a family; [...] And only for this duration is their grief slightly abated, the enforced absence of certain foods on their plates conjuring his father's presence somehow. (Lahiri 181)

6.7.3 Predicts the future and gives hope

In many cultures, rituals or myths exist that predict the future. In **MB**, there is a scene where Thanh invites a fortune teller, who predicts that the exiles would be able to go back home and that the communists will be pushed back. Despite the unlikeliness of this to happen, given the political facts, the exiles believe the fortune teller and restore their hope to eventually return to their home of their memories.

Mai observes this ritual with an “anthropologist’s eye” (Cao 146). Although she is shocked by the uncritical way the exiles believe the fortune teller, she understands the appeal of letting oneself believe in good endings and that belief makes a difference even though nothing else changes: “Clearly, life would continue to be lived as normal, but now we would have a sweet ending awaiting us beyond the rectangle of playing cards” (Cao 150). She understands the function behind the Vietnamese’s belief in astrology: the resurrection of hope.

I could see why it might be comforting to believe that the universe was predetermined by the elliptically different orbits of stars. After all, the appeal of astrology lay in the possibility of freedom from the futility of daily aspirations and daily fear. It allowed us to believe that, if human enterprises could not alter the course of history, then humans could simply declare themselves free from the brutishness of everyday endeavours. I understood the temptation. (Cao 156)

Astrology can also predict the people’s future by their date of birth. Mai was born in the *Year of the Water Buffalo*. According to her mother, this was a most unpropitious astrological combination. Since water buffalos are domestic animals to work in the rice fields, those born in the Year of the Water Buffalo face a “life of inevitable toil” (Cao 130). The world will demand of her “as much vigilance and devotion as it is prone to shocks and disappointment” (Cao 130), Mai’s mother predicts. Whereas Thanh has a rather negative outlook on Mai’s future, Mai does not succumb to her mother’s humbled view of life and finds a way of her own to interpret her birth: “What my mother hadn’t realized was that I was also born in the middle of August. In America, where anything was possible, that made me a Leo, king of the jungle, not beast of burden” (Cao 130).

TNS describes a Bengali tradition called *annaprasan*, “the rice ceremony”. The rice ceremony is an equivalent to Christian baptism for Bengali babies. However, instead of a ritualistic naming in the eyes of God, the “first formal ceremony of their lives centres around the consumption of solid food” (Lahiri 38) by letting them eat their first spoon of rice. In the next part of the ritual, the child is to predict its own future. Being offered a plate holding a pen, a cup of earth, and a dollar bill, the child touches one of the objects to indicate whether it will become a scholar, landowner or businessman. Gogol’s future, however, is unpredictable. After all, as it turns out later, his life is not predetermined, but happens, like a series of accidents.

Most children will grab at one of them, sometimes all of them, but Gogol touches nothing. He shows no interest in the plate, instead turning away, briefly burying his face in his honorary uncle’s shoulder.

“Put the money in his hand!” someone in the group calls out. “An American must be rich!”

“No!” his father protest. “The pen. Gogol, take the pen.” [...]

“Go on, Gogol, take something,” Dilip Nandi says, drawing the plate close. Gogol drowns, and his lower lip trembles. Only then, forced at six months to confront his destiny, does he begin to cry. (Lahiri 40)

6.7.4 Provides protection and healing

An important function of religion and belief is to feel protected. All cultures have developed a mythology of ghosts and spirits that either are a threat to humans or have the power to protect and heal them.

In Cuba, many people believe in *santería*, the syncretised religion of the Afro-Cuban community. DC’s Celia, even though she refers to herself as atheist (García 58), has a certain respect for the *santería* religion. To her, the magic performed by the *santería* practitioners seems uncanny, especially the blood rituals that include animal sacrifice (García 12), and she keeps her distance.

The novel not only content-wise deals with magic and spirits, but also employs it as a technique, called *magical realism*.

Magical realism is famous for its literary ability to blend the fantastic with the real. Its unique mix of logical and plausible aspects gives the reader the sense of real, visible and powerful images. In the novel *Dreaming in Cuban* by Cristina Garcia, this method is used to incorporate the essence of Cuban culture into the novel as magical realism originated from Cuba. Magical realism is used for the reader to have a better understanding of time and deeper analysis of context through rich, sensory details,

extensive symbolism and emotions, which bring out the dreamer-like aspect of the characters and understanding of the themes in the novel. (see Magical Realism)

The instances of magic realism in DC are, for example, Jorge who returns as a ghost, appearing to Celia in the ocean (García 5), and talking to Lourdes on her way home from the bakery, giving “her business advice and tells her who’s stealing from her at the bakery”, being mocked by Pilar as “[t]he ghost patrol” (136). In another scene, the *santéra*, Celia has tracked down to heal Javier from his cancer, vanishes into thin air:

Her body starts to sway, and her clasped hands rock beneath her chin until it seems she is all loose, swinging angles. And then, as Celia watches, the little *santéra*’s moist eyes roll back in her dwarfish head until the whites gleam from two pinpricks, and she trembles once, twice, and slides against Celia in a heap on the sidewalk, smoking like a wet fire, sweet and musky, until nothing is left of her but her fringed cotton shawl. (García 160)

In another scene, Pilar is recognised as a “daughter of Changó” by the shop owner of the botánica in New York where she goes to buy the herbs for a ritual (García 200). Changó is the most powerful god according to santería belief. Changó, or its Christian equivalent, la Santa Bárbara, is celebrated as the god of thunder (see Cubana-Santería). García alludes to the connection between Pilar and the goddess Changó a second time. As a child, all the nannies were afraid of Pilar, because they thought she was bewitched. They did not last long - “[o]ne girl left with a broken leg after slipping on a bar of soap Pilar dropped while the nanny was bathing her in the sink. Another woman, an elderly mulatta, claimed that her hair was falling out from the menacing stares the baby gave her” (García 24). Pilar remembers only one who was not frightened: “My new nanny wasn’t afraid. She told me that it was only the temperamental Changó, god of fire and lightning” (García 201). The chapter containing these two scenes, very tellingly, is titled “Daughters of Changó” (García 193).

MB illustrates how legends and tales can help to deal with anxiety and provide strength. Many of the mythological tales Mai has been told in her childhood help her to feel reassured in times when she is discouraged. Whenever she is distressed in a situation, she imagines being *Trung Trac*, the older sister of the *Trung sisters*, two women warriors that fought in the rebellion against the Chinese empire.

I sat in the MacMahons’ family room in the glow of dawn and imagined the multitudes of stories I had been told about the Trung sisters. I could see my father

strumming the guitar, plucking our ancient mournful history from the hollowness of its wooden frame. [...] My parents had stories that offered the sweet shield of this history to me. They were given to generous and creative revisions and would fill our world with different, more magnificent details with the retelling of each story. In this world, I was Trung Trac, the first fighter, along with her sister, to elevate guerrilla warfare and hit- and- run tactics into an art of war, the first Vietnamese to lead a rebellion of peasants against the Chinese empire. (Cao 119)

In these daydreams, where she dives deep into the world of legends and imagination, Mai depicts herself as strong and invulnerable. She becomes a superhero, who fears nothing and is in control of everything. In similar ways, Cao employs also other ancient legends in order to underline the connectedness of Mai's two worlds. By intertwining reality, memory and fiction, Cao very effectually re-enacts Mai and Thanh's history-stricken inner world.

6.8 Home and belonging

In this final section of the analysis, the focus is on how the characters of the three novels experience home. This experience differs according to their age when they immigrated, and the length they have been staying in the country. However, also the particular circumstances of how the immigration took place and what the immigrant's cultural concept of home is like influence the character's relationship to their countries of residence.

In advance of the detailed analysis, the following grid will provide an overview of the different immigrant experiences of the protagonists of the three novels:

	DREAMING IN CUBAN		MONKEY BRIDGE		THE NAMESAKE		
	Pilar	Thanh	Mai	Lourdes	Ashima	Ashoke	Gogol
Country of Birth	Cuba	Cuba	Vietnam	Vietnam	India	India	USA
Age at Immigration	2	21	14	30 - 40	20	20-30	-
Year of Immigration	1961	1961	1975	1957	1968	1968	-
Reason for Immigration	Political + economic reasons	Political + economic reasons	War refugee	War refugee	Economic + personal reasons	Economic + personal reasons	-
Relationship to USA	Home	Home	Home	Exile	Exile	Exile	home
Relationship to country of (paternal) origin	Second, ("lesser") home	Abandoned home	Abandoned home	Home	Home	Home	Not home

<i>Visits</i>	1	1	-	-	Regularly + long term after Ashoke's death	regularly	regularly
<i>English language competence</i>	Native	With accent	Native	low	With accent	With accent	Native
<i>Other language competence</i>	With accent	Native	Native	Native	Native	Native	With accent
<i>Identity</i>	Hybrid; US-American + Cuban	US-American	Hybrid; US-American + Vietnamese	Vietnamese, exile	Trans-cultural	Trans-cultural	Hybrid; US-American + Indian

Table 1

6.8.1 Immigrant community

Many of the first-generation immigrants seek close contact to their compatriots. In **DC**, Pilar describes Lourdes' Yankee Doodle bakeries as "gathering places for these shady Cuban extremists who come all the way from New Jersey and the Bronx to talk their dinosaur politics and drink her killer espressos" (García 177). Even though Lourdes has embraced her new home and does not intend to go back to Cuba, she still is an exile that, together with the other exiles, shares a sense of displacement from home. Together, they campaign against the Cuban communist regime that, in their eyes, is the reason for their exile: "They set up a toll-free hot line so that Cuban exiles could call in and choose from three scathing messages to send directly to the National Palace, demanding El Líder's resignation" (García 177). Lourdes' engagement in the exile community's anti-communism activism shows that she still feels connected to her birth-country.

In **MB**, the exile community is geographically defined, forming an urban enclave called Little Saigon. Not only for the Vietnamese refugees, but also for the American veterans, Little Saigon is like a substitute home, a "fabricated [...] familiarity for our own comfort, which had strangely also become a source of consolation and familiarity for the former GIs" (Cao 64). In a way, the veterans are part of the diasporic community, because they have witnessed the war and thereby, as Mai observes, are "forever set apart from everyone else, who hadn't" (Cao 65). Little Saigon represents a world "in and of itself" (Cao 203), where the exiles can keep on living their lives as they know it. Whereas for Thanh it is the only place in America where she feels that she belongs, Mai feels not fully integrated into the exile community. Since Mai only came to the USA when she was fourteen, the life in Vietnam is already too far in the distance

that she feels part of it: “In many ways, they continued to live in a geography of thoughts defined by the map of a country that no longer existed in terms I could understand” (Cao 66). Mai, therefore, feels excluded from the community. When, for example, her mother, Mrs Bay and Bill, an American veteran, meet in Little Saigon, it is *she* who does not belong, because she does not share their exile identity:

The three of them made an unlikely but nice little congregation in their pool of common space, a coalescence of assorted shapes that fit snugly in their common contagion of nostalgia. I knew I had no choice but to simulate wellmanneredness and join them. As my mother’s eyes and mine met and locked for a brief moment, I was afraid I knew what she was thinking: among the four of us, it was not Bill, but I, who would be considered the outsider with inside information. (Cao 212)

Mai’s benefit of being the outsider is the ability to “step back and watch with a degree of detachment the habits and manners of Little Saigon” (Cao 146). When she observes the community, she does it with an “anthropologist’s eye” and “an academic interest in the familiar” (Cao 146). This perspective enables Mai to realise that Little Saigon was

a world in which every shop was a shop specialising in the business not of numbers so much as dreams. People there could touch you with their fertile hopes and great expectations, and in their midst you could easily succumb to the sheer seductive powers of nostalgia and single-minded conviction. (Cao 203/4)

Even though it is built on illusions, Little Saigon has an important social function for the war refugees. They have a weekly get-together, where they cook traditional food and perform their ritual. The community does not only provide its members with familiarity and friendship, but also financial support. Mrs Bay, for example, starts a traditional loan system, the *hui*. The hui is a pot where all members pay into, in order to take from it when they need a small loan to start a business. This way, the community supports itself and does not depend on banks and other institutions that would not grant them any loans.

[A] gathering of Mrs Bay friends were setting up the rules of the hui, a community pot of money designed to give those who would otherwise be unqualified for bank loans immediate access to a lump sum of cash. Here was a gloating scheme of ingenuity, an immigrant strategy for economic survival that was taking on great possibilities. [...] The hui worked because it combined commercial calculations with unmitigated trust. (Cao 141/2)

Through the exile community, also the relationship to the home country is kept alive, for example, through money they collect to support former South Vietnamese soldiers (153).

A similar sense of community is shared by the Bengalis in **TNS**. The Gangulis have a big circle of Bengali acquaintances, who “all come from Calcutta, and for this reason alone they are friends” (Lahiri 38). Similar to MB, they all live close by and regularly meet at one of the families’ house for big dinner parties.

The families drop by one another’s homes on Sunday afternoons. They drink tea with sugar and evaporated milk and eat shrimp cutlets fried in sauce pans. They sit in circles on the floor, singing songs by Nazrul and Tagore, passing a thick yellow clothbound book of lyrics among them as Dilip Nandi plays the harmonium. They argue riotously over the films of Ritwik Ghatak versus those of Satyajit Ray. The CPIM versus the Congress party. North Calcutta versus South. (Lahiri 38)

What holds them together is not only that they share the same culture, but also that they share the same immigrant experience. Like Ashoke, “[t]he husbands are teachers, researchers, doctors, engineers” and “[t]he wives, homesick and bewildered, turn to Ashima for recipes and advice, and she tells them about the carp that is sold in Chinatown, that it is possible to make halva from Cream of Wheat” (Lahiri 38). The immigrant community functions as a support network and upholds traditions. The members of the immigrant community become substitutes of Ashima and Ashoke’s real family. Important occasions that are normally shared with family members, their Bengali friends take their place. At Gogol’s birth, Ashima is sad that it is not her real family that is with her:

As grateful as she feels for the company of the Nadis and Dr. Gupta, these acquaintances are only substitutes for the people who really ought to be surrounding them. Without a single grandparent or parent or uncle or aunt at her side, the baby’s birth, like most everything else in America, feels somehow haphazard, only half true. As she strokes and suckles and studies her son, she can’t help but pity him. She has never known of a person entering the world so alone, so deprived. (Lahiri 25)

Whereas for the first-generation-immigrants the community is a re-enactment of their Indian life, their children do not participate. They are “watching television or playing board games in a basement, the parents eating and conversing in the Bengali their children don’t speak among themselves” (Lahiri 62/3). When Gogol moves out from his parents’ house, he loses touch with the immigrant community. On the contrary:

He has no ABCD³¹ friends at college. He avoids them, for they remind him too much of the way his parents choose to live, befriending people not so much because they like them, but because of a past they happen to share. “Gogol, why aren’t you a member of the Indian association here?” Amit asks later when they go for a drink at the Anchor. “I just don’t have the time,” Gogol says, not telling his well-meaning cousin that he can think of no greater hypocrisy than joining an organization that willingly celebrates occasions his parents forced him, throughout his childhood and adolescence, to attend. (Lahiri 119)

6.8.2 Return to the (paternal) home country

Many immigrant novels deal with experience of returning home, so does **DC**. The last part of the chapter describes Pilar and Lourdes’ journey to Cuba.

For Pilar, going back to Cuba is the decisive step on the process of forming her identity. Her constant state of fluctuating between identities distresses her increasingly. It burdens her that she does not even know the home that she thinks Cuba could be to her. “Cuba. Planet Cuba. Where the hell is that?” (García 134). At twenty-one, she decides to take matters into her hands and go to Cuba, taking her mother along.

Pilar initiates the trip because she finds out that this is what she needs in order to come forward in her personal development. She feels like she has been preparing to confront her past for a long time and that she is “still waiting for my life to begin” (García 179) once she has completed this mission. Thus, the ending of the novel, the journey to Cuba, is at the same time the beginning Pilar is waiting for. Pilar reflects on the necessity to embark on this journey, coming up with the conclusion that she needs to be physically present in the place that she was born and that she cannot get her mind off and see her grandmother Celia in person, in order to find out what meaning they have in her life.

I think of Flaubert, who spent most of his adult life in the same French village, or Emily Dickinson, whose poems echoed the cadence of the local church bells. I wonder if the farthest distance I have to travel isn’t inside my own head. But then I think of Gauguin or D. H. Lawrence or Ernest Hemingway, who, incidentally, used to go fishing with my Abuelo Guillermo in Cuba, and I become convinced that you have to live in the world to say anything meaningful about it. (García 179)

Once back in Cuba, Pilar is not so sure anymore if the answers are so easily obtained. “Cuba is a peculiar exile, I think, an island-colony. We can reach it by a thirty-minute charter flight from Miami, yet never reach it at all” (García 219). Pilar makes the discovery that “one

³¹ “American-born conflicted/confused deshi”; deshi = word, Indian immigrants use to refer to themselves

cannot go home again” (Coward 99). Instead of the romanticised Cuba of her memory, she encounters a country, not only of beautiful nature, but also destruction, decay and poverty. The fact that Pilar helps her cousin Ivanito to emigrate, despite knowing how devastating this will be for Celia, shows that her image of Cuba has been revised and that she now understands her mother’s disapproval of Cuba’s politics. Pilar finally realises that “sooner or later I’d have to return to New York. I know now it’s where I belong – not *instead* of here, but *more* than here” (García 236).

Lourdes, who is still disconnected from her home due to the traumata she had to experience on its grounds, finally finds her way back through music and dancing: “When Lourdes finally danced with her nephew, she felt beholden to the congas, to a powerful longing to dance. Her body remembered what her mind had forgotten” (García 224). More memories come when she revisits different significant places, like her childhood bedroom: She “lies down on her childhood bed. Old sentences lurk beneath the mattress, in the rusted coils beneath the mattress, in the rusted coils beneath her back” (García 237). Even though Lourdes is not able to reconcile with her mother and the island, the journey helped her to process her past.

In the NS, the characters regularly travel to their homeland. Ashima and Ashoke always are looking forward to seeing their relatives again, people that Gogol and Sonia hardly know. What Gogol sees in the journeys to India is “a time without a room of his own, without his records and his stereo, without friends” (Lahiri 79). The longest time they spend in India is eight months. When his parents tell him to “[t]hink of it as a long vacation,” Gogol “knows that eight months is no vacation. [...] In Gogol’s opinion, eight months in Calcutta is practically like moving there, a possibility that, until now, has never even remotely crossed his mind” (Lahiri 79).

In India, the roles of the children being the adapted ones and the parents being the alienated ones are reversed. “Within minutes, before their eyes Ashoke and Ashima slip into bolder, less complicated versions of themselves, their voices louder, their smiles wider, revealing a confidence Gogol and Sonia never see on Pemperton Road. ‘I’m scared, Goggles,’ Sonia whispers to her brother in English” (Lahiri 81/2). Gogol and Sonia are not equipped by a double lens through which they can see and understand both, the American and the Bengali culture from an insider’s perspective. Gogol realises this during his stay: “Of all the people who surround them at practically all times, Sonia is his only ally, the only person to speak and sit and see as he does” (Lahiri 84). Gogol and Sonia, who are not used to the rough conditions

in India, get ill after the first months in Calcutta. “It is the air, the rice, the wind, their relatives casually remark; they were not made to survive in a poor country, they say” (Lahiri 86).

Ashima and Ashoke, in contrast to their children, enjoy their stay which means for them that they, for once, can be exactly who they are. They are at home, at the place where they know how things work and do not watch each of their steps. “His mother shops in New Market and goes to movies and sees her old school friends. For eight months she does not set foot in a kitchen. She wanders freely around a city in which Gogol, in spite of his many visits, has no sense of directions” (Lahiri 83). Whereas Gogol and Sonia are glad when it is time to return to America, Ashima and Ashoke, once again, have to say good-bye to their beloved family and home. “On the evening of their departure he watches his parents standing in front of framed pictures of his dead grandparents on the walls, heads bowed, weeping like children” (Lahiri 86).

Back in America, Gogol describes that it first feels like they are still “in transit”, (Lahiri 87) but soon, “the eight months are put behind them, quickly forgotten, like clothes worn for a special occasion, or for a season that has passed, suddenly cumbersome, irrelevant to their lives (88)”. This sense of being “in transit” describes Gogol’s position of being *in-between* and, thus, creating a third space. Whereas this feeling is most present while travelling physically between two places, it applies to his whole life.

6.8.3 Relationship to the country of residence

In **DC**, the USA is a place of refuge from the communist regime that has conquered Cuba. For Lourdes and Rufino, they first see themselves as exiles, having left their home with the intention to return once the revolutionist regime will have collapsed. They temporarily settle in Miami. However, it turns out that the communist regime lasts and they have no other choice than to embrace the US as their new home. The new beginning in the USA, on the one hand, is a great adjustment, since different than in Cuba, the Puente family is no longer wealthy and respected (García 69). On the other hand, Lourdes was eager to get far away from everything related to Cuba, the ground where her traumata were inflicted on her.

“I want to go where it’s cold,” Lourdes told her husband. They began to drive. “Colder,” she said as they passed the low salt marshes of Georgia, as if the word were a whip driving them north. “Colder,” she said through the withered fields of Carolina winter. “Colder,” she said again in Washington, D.C., despite the cherry-blossom promises, despite the white stone monuments hoarding winter light. “This is cold enough,” she finally said when they reached New York. (García 69/70)

Lourdes feels a great bitterness and resentment towards the island, and is sure she will not be “returning home to their beach, which is mined with sad memories” (García 24). She considers herself lucky for having had the possibility to start over in a new country.

Immigration has redefined her, and she is grateful. Unlike her husband, she welcomes her adopted language, its possibilities for reinvention. Lourdes relishes winter most of all – the cold scraping sound on the sidewalks and windshields, the ritual of scarves and gloves, hats and zip-in coat linings. Its layers protect her. She wants no part of Cuba, no part of its wretched carnival floats creaking with lies, no part of Cuba at all, which Lourdes claims never possessed her. (García 73)

Lourdes tries very hard to be a *real* American. She chooses the name Yankee Doodle Bakery for her business, printed on a red, white, and blue sign. Moreover, she listens to patriotic songs, like The Battle Hymn of the Republic by Jim Nabors (García 136) and celebrates Independent’s Day, selling “tricolor cupcakes and Uncle Sam marzipan”. Pilar mocks her mother for her exaggerated eagerness to show her alliance with America: “She’s convinced she can fight Communism from behind her bakery counter” (García 136). For her, Lourdes’ effort to blend into the local community is ridiculous and pretentious.

Mom makes food only people in Ohio eat, like Jell-O moulds with miniature marshmallows or recipes she clips from *Family Circle*. And she Barbecues anything she can get her hands on. Then we sit around behind the warehouse and stare at each other with nothing to say. Like this it? We’re living the American Dream? (García 136)

Pilar was only two years old before her family emigrated to the US. Her behaviour resembles that of any other American teenager. Still, she does not think of herself as belonging there: “Even though I’ve been living in Brooklyn all my life, it doesn’t feel like home to me. I’m not sure if Cuba is, but I want to find out. If I could only see Abuela Celia again, I’d know where I belonged” (García 58). Lourdes, who refuses to talk about the country and the mother she left behind, does not give Pilar the chance to learn more about her birth country. Cuba, thus, remains a vague and paradoxical place for Pilar. It is far away from her and almost completely unknown, but at the same time always present and a fact of her life that she cannot ignore. Finally, her conflict is solved when she visits the island.

MB’ Thanh and Mai also come to the USA to seek refuge from the war raging in their home country. Mai, who arrived in Virginia ahead from her mother, finds it comparably easy to settle in the new country, referring to Virginia as “home” already after three years of living in there (Cao 17). Her mother, on the other hand, wanted their new apartment “maintained as a mere way station, rootlessly sparse since the day of our arrival. She had no claim to American

space, no desire to stake her future in this land” (Cao 91). As she wished the stay to be only temporary, Mai’s mother tried to keep herself as unattached as possible to their new place. Instead of permanent cutlery and dishes, they used plastic spoons and knives, pick-nick plates and Styrofoam cups that her mother hand washed. “There was nothing to hold on to there. Nothing could stick in such a place. After all, absence itself would spare us from the roots of new history” (Cao 92).

Thanh holds on to the unrealistic expectation that she will be able to return to Vietnam based on the readings of a fortune teller or other spiritual signs. Mai worries about her mother’s inability to accept reality: “I looked at my mother and I saw that I was slightly afraid of her, her promises, her collapsed expectations, the unintegrated present and past that she had forced together” (Cao 211). Mai recounts a moment when she and her mother were watching TV on one of their first winter days in Virginia. Thanh was freezing because she still was in her tropical garment. Mai characterises this moment as “undramatic and meaningless” to her mother but “completely significant” to her: “I could have offered her reality: a sweater, socks. It would have been as simple as that. But somehow, at that moment, my mother, imperfect and unable to adjust, died in my mind” (Cao 70).

In contrast to Thanh, Mai understands that letting go of the past is “required to sustain a new identity: it all had to do with being able to adopt a different posture, to reach deep enough into the folds of the earth to relocate one’s roots and bend over one’s body in a new direction” (Cao 39). However, even though Mai tries to concentrate on her future in America, “Vietnam remained like an implant” in her brain (Cao 91) making her feel split between two different cultures: “My dilemma was that, seeing both sides to everything, I belonged to neither. I had become the intermediary, but [...] it was the clear-cut, not the complex, that I longed for” (Cao 88).

What feels like a burden to Mai at times also is an opportunity. As a 1.5-generation-immigrant she is able to see things that neither the immigrants of her mother’s generation, nor the Americans themselves can. She can see beyond the myths of the glorious American lifestyle that many of the non-Americans believed existed. Her ambivalent relationship to the USA is evident in the way she mocks the country in her narrative: “There was nothing to be afraid of. My mother and I were looking at a country in love with itself, beckoning us to feel the same” (Cao 31) Mai’s sometimes condescending tone is the result of her migrant background that

gave her the gift to look at culture through a double lens, a point of view inaccessible to mono-cultural people.

In contrast to DC and MB, in **TNS**, the immigration to the USA is a voluntary decision, at least for the male protagonist, Ashoke.

Ashoke and Ashima are the prototypical first-generation immigrants who will never fully assimilate to their new surrounding and are also recognised as such by the outside world. Gogol and Sonia, however, clearly do not identify themselves in their parents' terms. When, for example, the family's name on their post-box in Pemberton Road is disfigured, Gogol himself does not feel addressed personally, but reads it as an insult directed at his parents: "His ears burn at the sight, and he runs back into the house, sickened, certain of the insult his father will feel. Though it is his last name, too, something tells Gogol that the desecration is intended for his parents more than Sonia and him" (Lahiri 67). Interestingly, the Ganguli's name on the post-box as a manifestation of their occupation of a part in America that they (try to) make their home, appears again at the very end of the novel, when Ashima has put the house up for sale: "Ashima had felt a moment's panic, a protective instinct, wanting to retract her offer, wanting the house to remain as it's always been, [...]. But this had been sentimentality speaking. It is foolish for her to hope that the golden letters spelling GANGULI on the mailbox will not be peeled off, replaced" (Lahiri 275).

Ashima, who, in contrast to Ashoke, has not chosen to be an immigrant, suffers a lot in the USA. She complains that "ever since she's arrived in Cambridge, nothing has felt normal at all (6)" and that in this place "where she is related to no one, where she knows so little, where life seems so tentative and spare" (Lahiri 6), "there's something missing" (Lahiri 1). Even though, over time, Ashima learns how life in America works, she never abandons her heritage but stays loyal to the Bengali traditions. Proving her parents' predictions wrong, she neither starts "to eat beef or wear skirts or cut off her hair or forget her family the moment she landed in Boston", nor shows any other "of such signs of betrayal"; her grandmother "was the only person to predict, rightly, that Ashima would never change" (Lahiri 37). Even "after twenty years in America, she still cannot bring herself to refer to Pemberton Road as home" (Lahiri 108).

After Ashoke's death, Ashima decides to partially return to India, spending six months in Calcutta and six months in the US. Her name Ashima is emblematic of this version of her life,

travelling back and forth between two cultures: “True to the real meaning of her names, she will be without borders, without a home of her own, a resident everywhere and nowhere (Lahiri 276). Whereas “[f]or thirty-three years she missed her life in India”, now “[s]he will miss the country in which she had grown to know and love her husband” (Lahiri 279). When Ashima is at the point where she is about to leave the US, she realises that “though she still wears saris, still puts her long hair in a bun, she is not the same Ashima who had once lived in Calcutta. She will return to India with an American passport. In her wallet will remain her Massachusetts driver’s licence, her social security card” (Lahiri 276). Also her memories of Ashoke will continue to be connected to their house in Pemberton Road, although “his ashes have been scattered into the Ganges” (Lahiri 279). Ashima’s paradox relationship to the USA does not resolve and she accepts that “though she still does not feel fully at home within these walls on Pemberton Road, [...] this is home nevertheless – the world for which she is responsible, which she has created, which is everywhere around her” (Lahiri 280).

In contrast to his parents, Ashoke feels more American than Indian. Whereas “his parents and all their friends always refer to India simply as *desh*”, “Gogol never thinks of India as *desh*. He thinks of it as Americans do, as India.” In fact, he lives “in a place where such distinctions do not exist – surely that was emblematic of the greatest confusion of all” (Lahiri 118). This confusion becomes visible, when people make wrong assumptions about his identity due to his optical appearance. Once he is asked by one of the Ratliffs’ neighbours at what age he had moved to Boston:

“I’m from Boston,” he says. [...]

She goes on, “I once had a girlfriend who went to India. [...] she came back thin as a rail, and that I was horribly envious of her.” Pamela laughs. “But you must be lucky that way.”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean, 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, leaning across the table, rescuing Gogol from the conversation. “He was born here.” (Lahiri 157)

This passage illustrates how difficult it is for Gogol to claim his place in America with, at the same time, having a genetically imprinted Indian past.

7 Conclusion

Migration is a very complex social phenomenon that is influenced by a variety of different factors which are not easy to describe separately from each other, as they overlap. Therefore, it is not possible to make general statements about the impact of immigration on people's wellbeing and personal development. Rather, one must look at a person's individual story. The specific background of a person's migration is crucial in how he/she will experience the life and challenges in a new country. How immigrants manage to integrate themselves in the country they chose as their new residence also influences the relationship of the following generations to the country in which they are born. As a result, immigration is not only an experience that affects individual people, but is incorporated into the collective memory of families and is handed on from generation to generation.

The variety of types of immigration is visible in the manifoldness of literature that exists in this genre. However, when comparing novels from a specific time period and place, such as those selected for this thesis, some striking similarities can be observed. Even though *Dreaming in Cuban*, *Monkey Bridge* and *The Namesake* deal with very different forms of immigration, feature characters from different home countries and are written by authors who are not connected in any other way than by the fact that they are immigrants, similarities can be found in content as well as in formal features. This is evidence for the fact that immigrant fiction forms a separate genre with common characteristics.

One of the most obvious similarities is the novels' affinity with topics that concern identity. All of them present young protagonists who struggle with coming to terms with their transcultural selves. Whereas, in the beginning, they believe that they can only become their true selves by choosing to belong to one of their cultural heritages, in the end, they arrive at the same conclusion: There is no simple or definite answer to who they are. They learn to accept that they will have to negotiate their identities over and over again. The endings of the novels all mark the endpoint of the identity crisis of their youth. *Dreaming in Cuban's* passionate protagonist Pilar, who is lost between languages and places, reality and imagination, needs to revisit the place of her birth to realise where she belongs. Mai, the traumatised teenager in *Monkey Bridge*, is able to form a stable self after having processed her and her family's past which her mother had tried so hard to keep a secret from her. Gogol, the somewhat tragic main character of *The Namesake*, looks back at his life at the age of thirty-

two, finally aware of the fact that his name has been an accident and is not in the way of becoming who he wants to be.

After having analysed these three novels in a number of different aspects, it seems obvious that the issue of identity formation has a particular significance when it comes to immigrants or the children of immigrants. This confirms the assumption that has been made at the beginning of this thesis.

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9 Index

- 1.5 generation 43, 66
 American Dream 113, 129
 ancestors 22, 35, 43, 76, 77, 115, 117
 Assimilation 1, 8, 9, 136
 belonging 3, 4, 16, 19, 20, 22, 27, 37, 43, 60, 61, 100, 106, 122, 129
 Benedict Anderson 17
 Bengali 37, 45, 47, 50, 70, 71, 72, 74, 75, 79, 108, 109, 118, 120, 125, 127, 131
 bilingual 33, 39, 104
 body 33, 42, 44, 57, 68, 75, 76, 77, 79, 80, 81, 85, 94, 115, 117, 121, 127, 130
bricolage 19
 cancer 79, 81, 121
 communism 79, 114, 123
 Confucian 67, 117
 Cristina García 2, 4, 36, 39, 43, 135, 137, 140, 142
 Cuba 4, 36, 48, 55, 59, 62, 63, 64, 65, 66, 79, 82, 84, 85, 86, 95, 96, 98, 100, 101, 105, 106, 110, 112, 114, 117, 120, 122, 123, 126, 128, 129, 142
 Cultural pluralism 1, 10, 23
 David Cowart 38
 Diaspora 1, 22, 137, 138
 Eating disorders 2, 80
 essentialism 19
 ethnic minorities 30
 exile 36, 60, 70, 73, 77, 101, 112, 123, 125, 126
 Federico García Lorca 55, 97
 Flashbacks 90
 globalisation 12, 16
 grief 2, 74, 81, 82, 84, 94, 98, 118, 119
 home 1, 3, 4, 7, 12, 13, 20, 21, 22, 23, 24, 25, 27, 28, 37, 43, 47, 56, 58, 59, 65, 67, 70, 73, 74, 79, 83, 93, 97, 99, 100, 103, 109, 114, 117, 119, 121, 122, 123, 125, 126, 127, 128, 129, 131, 132, 133, 138
 homesickness 27, 28, 84, 100, 101, 103
 Homi K. Bhabha 19, 31
 homodiegetic narrator 44
 hybridity 1, 19, 20, 23, 31
 India 14, 32, 45, 47, 49, 50, 51, 61, 70, 72, 74, 91, 92, 103, 108, 109, 122, 127, 131, 132
 insanity 90
 intertextuality 40, 89
 Jhumpa Lahiri 2, 4, 37, 43, 45, 142
 Julia Alvarez 32
 karma 67, 76, 107, 114, 115, 116, 117
 Lan Cao 2, 4, 32, 35, 43, 44, 138, 142
 Little Saigon 60, 113, 123, 124
magical realism 101, 120
 Manifest Destiny 67
 mental illness 95
 miscarriage 84
 motherhood 54, 102
 multiculturalism 23
 nation 1, 10, 16, 17, 18, 23, 30, 35
 New Immigrant Literature 34, 40
 Nikolai Gogol 48, 49, 58, 59, 91, 116
 nostalgia 2, 28, 59, 100, 101, 124
 pet name 37, 47, 49, 50, 51, 71, 93
 post-traumatic stress 91
 rape 77, 84, 86
 ritual 34, 41, 78, 117, 118, 119, 120, 121, 124, 129
 Salman Rushdie 4, 35
 santería 95, 117, 120, 121
 scar 77, 78, 79, 86
syncretism 19, 23
 Third Culture Kid 20
 third space 1, 19, 20, 23, 28, 128
 transnationalism 11, 21
 trauma 29, 49, 78, 84, 85, 86, 87, 88, 89, 90, 91, 92, 138
 Vietnam 4, 35, 46, 48, 60, 66, 67, 80, 87, 88, 89, 113, 114, 117, 122, 123, 130
 Werner Sollors 33

10 Abstract

Diese Diplomarbeit beschäftigt sich mit der Verhandlung von Identität in zeitgenössischen Immigrationsromanen. Der erste, theoretische Teil beschäftigt sich mit: (1) soziologischen Theorien zu Gründen und Formen der Migration und Integration sowie multi- und plurikulturellen Gesellschaftskonzepten, (2) Identitätskonzepten und (3) der Entwicklung des Immigrationsromans. Der zweite Teil besteht aus einer Querschnittsanalyse dreier exemplarisch ausgewählter Immigrationsromane: *Dreaming in Cuban* von Cristina García erzählt die Geschichte einer cubanischen Familie, die im Zuge der kommunistischen Revolution zwischen den in Cuba verbliebenen Familienmitgliedern und denen nach den USA ausgewanderten geteilt ist. *Monkey Bridge* von Lan Cao beschreibt die Umstellungsschwierigkeiten einer Mutter und ihrer Tochter, zwei vietnamesischen Kriegsflüchtlingen, nach ihrer Ankunft in den USA. Der dritte Roman, *The Namesake* von Jhumpa Lahiri, schildert das Leben einer indischen Familie, die nach ihrer Auswanderung versucht, in den USA Fuß zu fassen.

In den Analysekapiteln werden unterschiedliche Aspekte von Identität in den jeweiligen Romanen untersucht. So wird verglichen, wie die Themen Namensgebung, zwischenmenschliche Beziehungen, Beziehung zum eigenen Körper, psychologischer Zustand und psychische Krankheiten, Probleme und Chancen der Zweisprachigkeit und interkultureller Kommunikation, Konfrontation unterschiedlicher Glaubens- und Wertesysteme und Fragen der kulturellen Zugehörigkeit in den drei Romanen aufgegriffen werden. Interessanterweise finden sich unerwartete Parallelen in Aufbau und Inhalt der Romane, obwohl diese sehr unterschiedliche Migrationserfahrungen behandeln. In allen drei Romanen geht es um die Frage, wie sich Immigranten in der fremden Umgebung zu Hause fühlen und ihre Vergangenheit in ihr neues Leben integrieren können. Des Weiteren werden auch die Schwierigkeiten der zweiten Generation von Immigranten geschildert, eine Identität zu bilden, die sowohl ihre Herkunftskultur also auch die Kultur ihres gegenwärtigen Landes integriert.

11 Curriculum Vitae

Personal details

Name:	Elvira Hagen
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Education

1995 - 1999	Elementary school in Senftenberg
1999 - 2007	Secondary school in Krems
Since 2007	University of Vienna: Teacher's Programme for English and History; English and American Studies

Experience

March 2008	“Gele-Gele” Project (Guiding pupils who live together in a community house for a week)
2008 - 2009	Tutoring for asylum seekers, German and Mathematics at “Integration-House” in Vienna
July 2009	Course at TICCS (Tamale Institute for Cross Cultural Studies); Tamale, Ghana
August 2009 – October 2009	Guided Tours at LOSIUM (Wine museum in Lower Austria)
2009 - 2010	Tutoring, English and German at Schülerhilfe (Tutoring institute)
2010 - 2012	Voluntary Work for Enchada (NGO): 2010 Collection of materials on climate-fairness, published as a folder for pedagogists 2011 Part of the organisational team for a workshop on fair economy and trade 2011 – 2012 Participation in, and organisation of a youth exchange programme with El Salvador 2012 Part of the organisational team for a workshop on how to obtain a sustainable lifestyle
Since 2010	Holding lessons on Fairtrade® and organic farming in schools and small groups of adults or children, “Welthaus Wien” (institution for education on development issues)
August 2010	Course at IBC (Instituto Bartholomé de las Casas); Lima, Perú
September 2010 – January 2011	Exchange semester at University of Rotterdam, Netherlands (Erasmus-Programme, University of Vienna)
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