Cultural identity is an essential infrastructure for development because without culture, there can be no socio, economic, scientific and spiritual development in a nation. A powerful tidal wave is surging across the world creating a new transition from tradition to modernity. Claude Levi-Strauss rightly observes:

Civilization has ceased to be that delicate flower which was preserved and painstakingly cultivated in one or two sheltered areas of a soil rich in wild species. I am caught within a circle from which there is no escape: the less human societies were able to communicate with each other and therefore to
corrupt each other through contact, the less their respective emissaries
were able to perceive the wealth and significance of their diversity (Tristes
Tropiques 64).

There is a great splinter and crash in value systems. India too has undergone an intense
cultural crisis in which the established culture and existing traditions are challenged by new
modes of thinking. What is always an issue in India starting from pre-independence period is the
drive to uncover differences between the Western canon of aesthetics and the Indian artistic
tradition. Currently Indian society faces two problems: There is an inevitability to formulate a
new identity not so alienated from the existing tradition. The second issue is the urgency to
discard the cultural identity created by tradition-bound society. One group of writers try to
articulate Indian identity in the midst of modernity and the other emphasize on the hybridity of
past and present. Very few shatter the generalized belief and go for extreme deviations.

Rabindranath Tagore, the voice of India makes use of his novels as vehicle for the
dissemination of Indian and western cultural values, attitudes and morality to construct national
identity. It is a reclaimed but hybrid identity articulating Indianness in the midst of modernity
whereas Jaishree Misra is known for her realistic revelation of the problems in relationships
confronted by men and women in India. Through her authentic portrayal of characters, she
exhibits the cultural identity of India marching towards Westernization in the name of
Modernization. But, both of them have chosen women characters to symbolize cultural identity
of the society and of the nation. Tagore’s masterpiece The Home and the World and
Jaishree Misra’s Afterwards have been chosen for study.

Tagore’s The Home and the World can be viewed in different ways. Firstly, it is a
triangular love story. The final fulfillment of a relationship is attained by realizing the truth
through great suffering. There are emotional disturbances in the minds of the central characters
that cause dislocation in their lives. Home, a secured shelter stands for the social confrontation
and the world, an open auditorium stands for political confrontation. The East equates with the
home and the West with the world. The main theme of the novel is the fear of western
domination over the existing tradition and culture. It is about the deconstruction of home into
pieces and re-formation and reformation of the very same after trials and tribulations.

The story revolves around three sharply contrasted characters: Nikhil, Bimala and
Sandip. Nikhil is a liberal man with modern ideas. He stands for all that is good and vital in
Tagore depicts India of his time through Bimala. In the beginning of the novel, she is portrayed as a devoted Hindu wife known for her humility and dedication. She wants to be a model of what women should be. Her husband, Nikhil longs to see her full-blossomed in all aspects and to know about the world. The opportunity comes in the form of Swadeshi movement. This ‘came in like a flood, breaking down the dykes and sweeping all our prudence and fear before it’ (The Home and the World 25). Woman is the emblem of creation, power and inspiration. There is no other place where she can realize all her ambitions and joy except home. When she steps out of it, the price paid is heavy and society gets burdened with negative elements. Throughout human history, woman has been adored, respected, loved and in some cases worshipped. In the Indian context, she is worshipped as the centre of power. India in its past glory was celebrated high for its valuable ancient culture and aesthetic tradition. Even today, India is respected only for indomitable pride for its spiritual heritage and empirical beauty. After the invasion of Britain, an outside element, India’s glory adulterated. Bimala’s metamorphosis also starts with the entry of Sandip, a friend of Nikhil who is in no way a match to Nikhil. The first phase of Nikhil-Bimala’s life has no problem. She is quite happy and content at home since for a woman her world is her home, husband and children. She is pleased with this world of hers. Woman’s primer paradise is home where they can come to know everything. Only when they come out of the paradise, comes the evil. From the very first day of Sandip’s meeting with Bimala, Sandip poisons Bimala’s mind by placing her on the throne of authority outside her home. He creates an impression of raising the ordinary homebound Bimala from ignominious depth of ignorance and obscurity to the heights of enlightenment and glory.

In the opening pages of the novel, Bimala, a traditional home-bound Bengali wife and an epitome of Indian womanhood prides herself: “I was his queen. I had my seat by his side; But my real joy was, that my real place was at his feet” (The Home and the World 12). Passion enters into the comfort world of Bimala in the form of Sandip, as Satan entered into the God-protected world of Adam and Eve in the form of snake. Sandip exploits the mind of the people as Britain exploited India. He surrenders nationalism and humanism for the sake of personal benefits. In the beginning, “Bimala found herself free in the outer world” (The Home and the World 52).

Bimala’s encounter with Sandip sparks off her degeneration. She gradually perceives the cunning mind of Sandip and makes a deliberate choice to return home. She craves for the past and returns to the tradition bound home. Finally, she prefers to exercise her authority at home simultaneously showering her love and affection on Nikhil.
Sandip an energetic and egoistic character is the one who picturizes the emerging trend of present democratic India and also the new track that was shaped during the nationalistic movement. He carefully keeps his followers confused by mixing up freedom of the country with the modern westernization, nationalism and social behavior. Sandip is sufficiently intelligent to guess the emptiness of his views. He projects himself to be the Machiavellian hero who does not bother about the means. Tagore with prophetic vision issues his warning against the European ethos of materialism and the Indian heritage of spiritualism as a counterpoint through the character portrayal of Nikhil, Bimala and Sandip.

Jaishree Misra’s *Afterwards* speaks about the various instances that lead ruptures in relationships. Relationships are complex algebraic equations, a little bit difficult to understand when the elements of love and loyalty are missing.

In *Afterwards*, when Rahul Tiwari arrives in Kerala for a short break from London, he finds himself playing friend, partner, co-conspirator and finally the unexpected role of a saviour to Maya. Maya, suffocating under the weight of a loveless marriage and a suspicious husband, turns to him for help.

The novel has three main characters: Maya, Rahul and Govind. Maya, young, cheerful and beautiful is the heroine of the novel. She badly waits to escape from her husband. She does not care for her identity nor is she worried about protecting the Indian culture and tradition. Her only motive is to move away from the loveless life she is experiencing.

When Maya frankly shares about her married life, she confesses that Govind does not beat her or torture her, but the one and only problem she faces with him is his suspicious nature. Indian women, after marriage, face many untold miseries and sorrows. Drunkenness, drug addiction, illegal relationship, unemployment, physical pain, mental torture and verbal abuse are the most common problems that Indian wives face with their husbands throughout their lifetime. But, the beautiful irony is that, no matter what happens, they never ever leave their husbands. They do not give a thought of betraying their husbands and eloping with someone else or filing a divorce. Indian wives give much importance to culture. They undergo all types of suffering to preserve their cultural identity. Maya is an exception. Maya has a nice house, a nice car and a husband who gives her everything. Her house has “three bedrooms, three attached bathrooms, stainless steel sink in a fully tiled kitchen” (*Afterwards* 56-57). The way she narrates her life to Rahul indicates that she is creating self-pity in him. She acts as if she is helpless and asks Rahul to get her a job in Delhi:
‘Please help me to get a job---in Delhi or somewhere. Any job, please!’

‘But you haven’t even got a degree, Maya,’ I reminded her gently. ‘And you have little Anjali.’

‘I could work in a nursery or something. Keep Anjali with me. I could study part-time---I used to be a good student.’ (Afterwards 57)

Maya is bold enough to throw off her current identity, leave her husband for the simple reason that he is suspicious and elope with Rahul, completely shedding her identity. Maya’s strong decision of betraying her husband is quite shocking. Her unbelievable courage also compels Rahul to take a wrong decision, urges him to take risk. Hence, he follows the heart rather than the mind and does the unthinkable:

And so it came to pass that Maya left Kerala with Anjali and with me. It wasn’t quite an elopement, but that was certainly how it was seen by everyone else. Trivandrum would have reeled from the shock of it for days after that. But we were not to know what was being said. (Afterwards 67)

Maya and Rahul reach England and start living a new life there. For the mistake Maya committed, she meets with an accident three years after and loses her life.

The second important character is Rahul Tiwari. He is Maya’s neighbor who exchanges food and daily chats with her in the beginning. Slowly, the relationship takes a different turn. Maya creates situations and voluntarily talks to Rahul. Rahul senses that Maya is unusually happy and feels shy when they have a conversation. He also finds out that Maya’s husband, Govind is uncaring and suspicious.

Rahul Tiwari, though looks kind and patient, is basically a selfish person. He rents a house and manages to live in it without bothering about loneliness. The author does not say a word about
his other relations but it is clear that he is far from everyone he knows. On a conversation with Maya, Rahul confesses:

My sort of existence can feel like a very selfish one sometimes. I just do what I want to do, go where I want to go … big, important things, like family ties and statehood and even nationhood seem to have passed me by completely. (Afterwards 40-41)

Still, at times Rahul feels guilty of what he is doing. He can never deny that he is getting attracted towards Maya. As a just man, he is troubled and confused of his strange relationship with Maya. He muses:

… goddammit, you couldn’t just go falling in love with some poor kid’s mother, could you? Some things ought to be sancrosanct. Other people’s lives, other men’s wives, the trust of little children, most of all. (Afterwards 50)

Rahul had never faced any problem with the ‘sancrosanct’ or its rules. But, now the rules seem to have made him as its victim. They are temporarily ruling him. He tries hard to stop himself from what is going on. But, Maya and Anjali just draw him towards them. He is not able to accept what he is doing:

… that another man’s wife was sitting here, next to me, looking for all the world as though she were indeed mine. Worst of all, worst of bloody all, her small child was looking at me now, as though already aware that I was about to transgress that one final rule. And change the course of her world along with ours. (Afterwards 50)

Rahul is the most important factor who encourages Maya to throw away her Indian identity and rebel against tradition. Maya totally discards her identity of Govind’s wife and leaves her husband.

Govind, as a character, makes his physical presence in the novel only after the death of his
Research paper on Afterwards

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wife. He reaches England to get back his daughter, Anjali. The social services people who are taking care of Anjali call Govind and ask him to reach England keeping in mind the physical, emotional and financial needs of the baby. When he meets Rahul, he is reminded of what Rahul and his ex-wife did to him. Govind is basically very traditional and follows old beliefs. To such a husband, Maya is unbearable. Even when Riya and women from the social service offer their hands to greet him, he avoids. Below is an observation made of Govind by Rahul:

I could tell he was uncomfortable with this and remembered that in India women did not usually shake hands. Unless they moved in very westernized circles and met a lot of foreigners. I knew from all the things Maya told me that Govind was old-fashioned, full of conservative beliefs. (Afterwards 201)

When the social service people ask Govind as to how Anjali’s future should be organized, he replies: “I think she should go back with me to India. That is her home, she should never have been taken away from there at all” (Afterwards 202).

Govind fears that Anjali would choose a life like her mother. So, he is clear and stubborn that Anjali must be brought up only with him. This would enable the baby to realise the values and traditions of India. Govind, as Anjali’s biological father, would also check if she follows the traditions properly without going astray like her mother. Here, Govind gives much importance to the cultural identity of his daughter.

In both of their writing, the actual day-to-day problems of life are encountered, examined, exposed, challenged and settled. Rabindranath Tagore’s heroine, Bimala wishes to create a new identity not so alienated from the existing tradition. At the end, she learns a valuable lesson and preserves the Indian culture and tradition. Tagore gives freedom to his woman character to feel and think in her own way. Meanwhile, she realizes the existing realities of the world. On the other hand, Jaishree Misra’s Maya gets an urgent need to discard the cultural identity created by tradition-bound society. The wave of passion in the form of concern strikes her vehemently and she admits. Thereby, she betrays her husband, Govind and elopes with Rahul Tiwari out of pure selfishness. This paper aims at projects the cultural identity exemplified in Rabindranath Tagore’s novel The Home and the World and Jaishree Misra’s Afterwards. Both the writers expose India of their respective periods.

References
