
# NAMING JHUMPA LAHIRI

## CANONS AND CONTROVERSIES

Edited by **LAVINA DHINGRA** and **FLOYD CHEUNG**

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# Preface and Acknowledgments

Jhumpa Lahiri is the first Indian immigrant to win the Pulitzer prize and become an overnight bestseller worldwide. Her meteoric success has incited controversies regarding the naming of her identity and the canons to which she belongs. Is she a Bengali, Indian, Asian American, American, or a postcolonial writer? Is she simply a writer? Does what we name her matter? The essays in this volume address these questions and shed light on why what we call authors or literary texts may matter.

The co-editors of this volume are thankful to all who have helped us develop answers to these questions. We believe in the dynamism of collaborative scholarship, especially when scholars from different fields of study including postcolonial, Asian American, American, women's studies, world literature, popular culture, psychoanalytic theory, and film criticism together create a collection generating multiple and divergent insights. We have aimed to produce such a work in *Naming Jhumpa Lahiri: Canons and Controversies*.

The seed of this anthology was sown in Floyd's course on Asian American women writers at Smith College in Fall 2007. Lavina, a visiting scholar in the class, focused on Lahiri's novel *The Namesake*. The intellectual dance of ideas between us and among the students, as well as the spirited debate that followed with faculty colleagues during Lavina's public lecture, created this book's framework. For sponsoring that visit, we thank the Smith College Department of English, American Studies Program, Program for the Study of Women and Gender, the Lecture Committee, and the Five College Asian/Pacific/American Studies Program.

Those fruitful conversations led to our co-authored essay written during Floyd's visits to Bates in Spring 2008 and Fall 2010. For funding those, we thank the Bates College Learning Associates Program and the English Department. For their interest and engagement, we are appreciative of all our students at Smith College and Bates College. Other venues that have given us opportunities to refine our thinking include Bowdoin College and

the Foxborough, Massachusetts public library. To all of you, we are thankful.

We have presented our work in progress and argued with scholars at conferences of the Association for Asian American Studies, the American Literature Association, and the Society for Multi-Ethnic Studies of Europe and the Americas. We thank all who have deliberated with us regarding Jhumpa Lahiri's writings, but especially those whose original work is included in this volume. Our contributors are meticulous scholars who have responded to one another's drafts, working together in collaborative tension.

We have benefited from the generosity of the Smith College Dean for Academic Development, the Bates College Faculty Development Grant, research assistance from Jacquelyn Lam, funded by the Smith College STRIDE Program, editorial work by Susan Pelletier, and our efficient, enthusiastic publishers at Lexington Books, especially Sabah Ghulamali, Emily Natsios, Justin Race, Michael Sisskin, and Eric Wrona. We thank Christopher S. Harris for designing the book's cover with Lavina's painting.

And of course, great appreciation goes to Jhumpa Lahiri, whose works give such pleasure and inspire so much thought. Quotations from *The Interpreter of Maladies* and *The Namesake* are used by permission of Houghton Mifflin Harcourt Publishing Company; quotations from *Unaccustomed Earth* are used by permission of Alfred A. Knopf, a division of Random House, Inc.

**From Lavina:**

I would like to express my personal appreciation for the gentle souls who have taught me how to laugh, love, and live joyfully: Guruji, Muse, Prema, and Johnsson. Thank you for recognizing and reclaiming me in this lifetime! Gratitude goes to my parents Savita and Khem for your love, sacrifices, and generosity, and for allowing me access to the whole world despite your own difficult childhoods during the Partition. Thanks to special family members for your help and guidance through different stages of life: Lynn Lidz, Shavina and Aadya Prakash, Vineet Dhingra¸ Sangeeta Gauba, and my late grandparents Amrit Devi and K. D. Dhingra, Kaushalya and L. D. Batra.

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I thank my students through the years at Bates, but especially Lauren Kawana, Linda Lam, Mari Wright, Mercedes Grandin, and Lexy Smith. Thank you, Floyd, for our effortless, perfectly compatible collaboration, and friendship.

*Lavina Dhingra, Bates College*

**From Floyd:**

Like so many of Lahiri's first-generation characters, my parents, Chow and Mabel Cheung, left the land of their birth and transplanted their roots to the unaccustomed earth of the United States of America. For enduring losses I cannot fully know and yet creating a strong home, I offer my humble thanks and wholehearted respect. Many of Lahiri's second-generation characters, like Gogol Ganguli, find themselves at the end their narratives without having started their own families—"alternatal" families, as Ambreen Hai, contributor to this volume, puts it. I consider blessed every moment that I can spend with my wife, Sheri, and children, Claire and Ben. They have been only patient and supportive during the writing and editing of this book. *Grazie*. Finally, I am thankful for the many intellectual homes and families that I have had over the years, especially those formed by my colleagues at Smith College, the Five College Asian/Pacific/American Studies Program, and the Association for Asian American Studies, among them Lavina Dhingra, a generous mentor in my early days and now co-editor and co-author extraordinaire.

*Floyd Cheung, Smith College*

## *Introduction*

# Naming Jhumpa Lahiri

## *Bengali, Asian American, Postcolonial, Universal?*

Lavina Dhingra, Bates College and Floyd Cheung, Smith College

Jhumpa Lahiri is currently among the few popular contemporary writers being read widely in the United States and internationally, by both mainstream and minority audiences, the general public and academic scholars. While her literary works focus on specific ethnic experiences of highly educated, upper middle-class, professional and cultural elite Bengalis[1] and their children living in New England since the 1970s, they simultaneously address universal themes that consistently keep them on the *New York Times* bestseller lists, and that have made the film adaptation of her novel, *The Namesake*, into a transnational phenomenon. Lahiri is also one of the first South Asian American writers to be included in the *Heath Anthology of American Literature* and, hence, explicitly acknowledged as a canonical presence.[2]

Born in 1967 in London to Bengali parents, Lahiri moved to Rhode Island when she was one year old. Formally named Nilanjana Sudeshna Lahiri, she was encouraged by her kindergarten teacher to go by her "pet" name, Jhumpa (Minzesheimer). Her father worked as a librarian at the University of Rhode Island, and her mother as a teacher. Although they made New England their home, Lahiri and her family maintained connections to friends and relatives in Calcutta via frequent trips. Hence, Lahiri was raised in a highly literate, bi-cultural atmosphere. She went on to study English at Barnard College, earn three master's degrees (in English, creative writing, and comparative studies in literature and the arts), and wrote a dissertation

on the representation of Italian architecture in Jacobean English drama for her Ph.D. in Renaissance literature at Boston University. She now lives with her husband, son, and daughter in New York City.

Jhumpa Lahiri follows in the tradition of successful late twentieth-century Indian American writers, yet her twenty-first-century writing and its reception differ from those of her immigrant predecessors. Ved Mehta's autobiographical writings in *The New Yorker* introduced Americans to pre- and post-Partition India throughout the 1960s and '70s; the publication of Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* in 1980 brought Indian literature in English to the attention of elite literary and scholarly audiences in England and elsewhere; the summer 1997 special issue of *The New Yorker* celebrating the fiftieth anniversary of the Indian Independence from the British highlighted the so-called coming of age of Indian literature in English for a literary American audience; and from the mid-1970s onwards, Bharati Mukherjee's portrayal of South Asian immigrant experiences in Canada and the United States satisfied the demand for U.S. multiculturalism, especially in the academy since the 1990s.[3]

Even though diasporic writers of South Asian descent have won many prestigious international prizes including the Nobel (V. S. Naipaul), Booker (Salman Rushdie, Arundhati Roy, Kiran Desai), and the Commonwealth Prize (declined by Amitav Ghosh), none has been honored by the American literati as magnanimously as Jhumpa Lahiri, the first South Asian recipient of the Pulitzer Prize for her debut short story collection, *Interpreter of Maladies* (1999). Perhaps that is partly due to Lahiri's position as a second-generation writer focused primarily on narrating second-generation *American* experiences. As Lavina Dhingra (formerly Shankar) noted in "The Limits of (South Asian) Names and Labels: Postcolonial or Asian American?" (1998) the constant naming, misnaming, and renaming of South Asians (as "East Indians," "Asian Indians," "Indian subcontinentals," and so on) since their arrival in the United States in the nineteenth century, had led to their invisibility within both Asian American and American studies even as late as the end of the twentieth century.[4] However, the meteoric success of Jhumpa Lahiri has raised new questions regarding the naming, if not the hyper-visibility, of South Asian writers within the last decade.[5] Lahiri's *Interpreter of Maladies* won the 2000 Pulitzer Prize and the Pen/Hemingway Award, was translated into 29 languages, and received

rave reviews in *New York Times Book Review, New York Times*, *Wall Street Journal*, *Time*, and *Newsweek*, among others. The *New Yorker* first published three of her stories and recognized Lahiri as one of the 20 best young American fiction writers in 1999. Lahiri received a Guggenheim Fellowship in 2002. Her stories are included in *The New Yorker*, *Harvard Review*, and in the anthologies *More Stories We Tell: The Best Contemporary Short Stories by North American Women* (2004), and *The Best American Nonrequired Reading, 2005*, among other prestigious mainstream venues.

Her three fictional works so far—*Interpreter of Maladies* (1999), *The Namesake* (2003), and *Unaccustomed Earth* (2008)—have been selected by book clubs across the country, translated into dozens of languages for distribution around the world, transformed into other media including film, earned the approbation of elite literary journals and arts organizations, and taught in a variety of high-school, college, and university classes.[6] It is also perhaps worth noting that Lahiri's primary choice of genre—viz., the short-story collection in her first and third books—contributes to the popularity and easy consumability of her work. Rocío Davis has argued such collections are powerful because their structures allow for a diversity of heterogeneous perspectives even from within a presumably homogenous community (e.g., the many Japanese American voices that narrate stories in Toshio Mori's *Yokohama, California* or Hisaye Yamamoto's *Seventeen Syllables*). This argument applies well to *Interpreter* which presumably focuses on Bengali Americans in Boston through the 1970s and 1980s, but enables readers to see through narrative perspectives that are as diverse as those of the young American boy Eliot whom the eponymous Mrs. Sen babysits, the dejected husband Shukumar in "A Temporary Matter," and Twinkle, the feisty Indian American wife obsessed with decorating her house with Madonna statuettes, among others. In addition, the fact that Lahiri's short stories have been easily excerpted has enabled them to travel as independent pieces in magazines like the *New Yorker* and into anthologies—and hence high school and college courses—ranging from those focused on the short story to those sampling ethnic or multicultural American, Asian American, South Asian diasporic, and world literature.[7] Consequently, they have not only made their author famous but also made

Americans realize that as readers, “we’re way more interested in Bengali immigrants than we thought we were” (Grossman).

Ironically, however, Jhumpa Lahiri was an immigrant Bengali child herself lost among different names, languages, and cultures. She explains: “I would like to see myself as an American writer. When I was raised I was told not to think of myself as an American. It was important to my mother to raise her children as Indian [ . . . ]. Even now it is hard for me to say I am American” (Rothstein E2). Hence, the controversy remains about her naming: Is Jhumpa Lahiri a Bengali writer? An Indian writer? An Asian American writer? A postcolonial writer? An American writer? A global writer? Is she, to paraphrase poet Cathy Song, simply a writer who “happens” to have been born in London to Bengali parents, grew up in Rhode Island, traveled frequently to Calcutta, lived in Boston, and now resides in New York? Why does this naming matter? To what extent do academic categories and labels limit or expand our understanding of the so-called aesthetic for the political and ideological?[8] And who decides what is considered aesthetic and what is ideological since all aesthetics are also already imbued with politics? How does this naming determine whether, and how, and by whom Lahiri’s texts are taught and read, and to which literary canons they belong?[9]

The essays in this volume address these and other questions, and in every case, they explain why naming matters, to whom, and how paying attention to these questions can deepen not only our appreciation for the politics that surround Lahiri’s works but also our understanding of the literary texts themselves. Although Jhumpa Lahiri has received popular media attention globally, critical scholarship in the United States has thus far been sporadic, and confined to recent conference panels (e.g., 2009 and 2011 Association for Asian American Studies, 2009 and 2011 American Literature Association, 2008 Modern Language Association), individual essays in journals (e.g., Brada-Williams, Caesar, Song), or in edited collections on broader topics (e.g., Dhingra Shankar, Rajan). And yet we know that her texts are being read by many diverse audiences and taught widely at the undergraduate and graduate levels.[10]

*Naming Jhumpa Lahiri: Canons and Controversies* is the first full-length literary analysis of this remarkably successful writer’s oeuvre. Naming the canon or canons to which Lahiri’s texts belong, we argue, can affect how

various audiences read them, and how often and in which contexts she is being (or can be) taught and interpreted. For instance, from within the American academic context, David Lynn, the editor of the *Kenyon Review*, maintains adamantly that Lahiri should not be read as a postcolonial writer. He writes, "There's nothing postcolonial about" her work and that it succeeds to the degree that it is "old-fashioned and literary" (163, 161). According to Lynn, Lahiri's "ambition is to play in the literary big leagues" (161). This particular naming, however, suggests that the postcolonial canon, which includes V. S. Naipaul, Salman Rushdie, Anita Desai, and others, is a minor league. We suspect that for Lynn the Asian American, ethnic American, and even American canons would count as minor. The problematics of Lynn's hierarchy aside ("old-fashioned" must be code for not only "literary" and "major" but also for "universal" and "great"), such categorization has the more important effect of limiting the approaches and questions we bring to Lahiri's work. What do we miss when we focus on the "old-fashioned and literary" (e.g., see Lynn, Field, Kung)? Can't her work at once appeal to such ostensibly universal sensibilities and address the recurrent concerns of so-called ethnic canons? Lynn's point of view articulates the stakes of only one controversy, of course. Other controversies surrounding Lahiri include, for instance, the degree to which her work represents her subject matter favorably and accurately—that is, her depiction of the lives of middle- and upper-middle-class Bengali immigrants and their children. Is her work appealing precisely because it is "not too spicy" for mainstream American (or global?) tastes, as Dhingra Shankar terms it in her 2009 essay by that name, while also providing just enough specific ethnic flavors?

While some scholars appreciate Lahiri's sociologically realistic and ethnographically detailed portrayals of Bengali Americans, others accuse her of exoticizing them (e.g., see Patel, Rajan, and Shah). Like previous highly visible, award-winning ethnic American authors, including Toni Morrison and Maxine Hong Kingston, who also have been read by broad multi-ethnic audiences and in multiple contexts, Jhumpa Lahiri bears a burden of ethnic representation.[11] Throughout the 1990s, another Bengali American, Bharati Mukherjee, had also been criticized by most Indian American critics for cultural misrepresentations, especially since she was often found speaking for all immigrants in scholarly interviews and media

representations. Although Lahiri does not present herself as an ethnic representative of Indians in the United States, it is important to pay attention to the easy consumability of her fiction, which encourages some readers to view her as an ethnic representative.[12] Fortunately, however, what has changed since the time Bharati Mukherjee was popular in the mid-1980s and early 1990s, is that there are many more writers and scholars of South Asian descent living in the United States now who can provide alternatives to Lahiri's perspectives.[13]

The celebrity author herself has demurred at both her meteoric rise and her ethnic representativeness. According to interviews, her Pulitzer remains in bubble-wrap, and like other writers presumed to represent their respective ethnic heritages, she states flatly, "I've never written for anyone other than myself" (Grossman; Wiltz).[14] Yet the enormous attention that she has received invites scholars to measure the scale of her success and determine the literary canon or canons of which she is a part and to which she contributes. On the one hand, critics like David Lynn attempt to disregard her ethnic, racialized identity and focus on the formal quality of her texts. On the other hand, some critics look to her identity as an Indian American and expect her to engage with the politics of ethno-racial and cultural identity in her writing—ideally in a way that they see as progressive. This is the burden of representation under which nearly all ethnic American writers labor. Not surprisingly, Anzia Yezierska, Saul Bellow, and Philip Roth were first known for representing Jewish life and only later as writers of American literature. This is the burden that Cathy Song references in her declaration, "I am a poet who happens to be Asian American," and Paisley Rekdal laments that, "Growing up, we have always been aware of an audience that is prepared to define us" (175).

In her 1998 essay, "The Limits of (South Asian) Names and Labels: Postcolonial or Asian American?," Lavina Dhingra Shankar asked a series of provocative questions: "if South Asian Americans' voices are now being heard in the academy, does it signify that they are being invited (allowed) to speak? . . . And under what categories—South Asian, postcolonial, or Asian American—must their voices be classified in order to be heard?" (52). With savvy, Jhumpa Lahiri seems to negotiate among several labels. She has appeared at televised readings arranged by the South Asian Journalists Association; she is called a "post-colonial writer" by an author for

*Associated Content* (Wood); and she is happy to be labeled as "universal" by National Public Radio (Block). This savvy, of course, has been critiqued as indecisiveness, lack of commitment, opportunism, or even hubris. Some ask whether Lahiri aspires to either a "universal" reputation or a more ethnically or politically specific and committed one. But the essays in our volume when taken together demonstrate that Lahiri's fiction does not succumb to binary options. We, along with several of our contributors, suggest that it succeeds because it eloquently, perceptively, and subtly sheds light on *both* universal dimensions of human experience *and* more specific Bengali, postcolonial, Indian diasporic, South Asian American, and Asian American politics.

Readers of Lahiri's fiction are often captivated not only by her engaging realist writing style but also by her uncanny renderings of seemingly universal human events with which many can identify, such as marital harmony or disharmony as in several stories in *Interpreter* and *Unaccustomed Earth*; leaving home for college, rebelling against one's parents, falling in love, rejecting or choosing a name, losing a spouse or parent to death, in *The Namesake*; being pregnant or a parent in *The Namesake* and in *Unaccustomed Earth*; and the evolving, often bittersweet relations between husbands and wives, brother and sister, long lost lovers, or parents and children or grandchildren in *Unaccustomed Earth*.

Additionally, the very content of Lahiri's texts asks her readers to consider questions of literary canonicity. For instance, in her novel, *The Namesake*, the college-aged protagonist Nikhil/Gogol "attends a panel discussion about Indian novels written in English" (118). While reading this scene, we are encouraged to think about what this category of literature includes and whether *The Namesake* itself could be considered an Indian novel written in English. The novel's next sentence seems to provide clarity, when "one of the presenters on the panel" is identified as "a distant cousin who lives in Bombay" (118). For a brief moment, the reader might assume that this panel features the work of writers who principally identify as being from India. We might think of V.S. Naipaul, Salman Rushdie, Anita and Kiran Desai, and Amitav Ghosh, who are known primarily for their works about Indians in India or in the diaspora outside the United States. Lahiri's novel then surprises us, however, with the following sentence uttered by one of the panelists: "Teleologically speaking, ABCDs are unable to answer the

question, ‘Where are you from?’” (118). The protagonist learns that ABCD stands for “‘American-born confused deshi. In other words, him” (118).[15] Yet at the same time that the protagonist experiences this self-recognition, he dis-identifies with it. “He has no ABCD friends at college,” the narrator tells us, “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” (119). On the one hand, we can respect the second-generation American’s point of view as that of a young man seeking to craft an individual identity by refusing that alienating label, but on the other, we know that this character is purposefully enforcing a distance—a deep sense of loss, it turns out—from his postcolonial and immigrant heritage (symbolized in part by his father and his books) that will return to haunt him (as is discussed in detail by Cheung and Dhingra’s essay in this volume). Similarly, it is significant to note that Lahiri’s fiction neither highlights the racial identity or the cultural politics of her characters nor comments on the history of legalized racial exclusion of all Asians (including South Asians) from the United States throughout the early twentieth century until the Immigration Act of 1965 was passed. Lahiri’s characters seem to imply they live in a more de-racialized and de-classed U.S. political landscape than is the socio-historical reality, especially in a post 9/11 world hypersensitive to “brown folks,” irrespective of class, nationality, and religion.[16] This deracination of her characters and depoliticizing of the historical events (including in *Unaccustomed Earth* which is written long after 9/11/01) does allow for an easier consumability of Lahiri’s fiction by most readers, irrespective of their racial or cultural background, as is argued cogently by Srikanth’s essay in this volume. It also urges us to reconsider the names and labels attached to Lahiri’s literary persona and public presentation.

Not surprisingly, Lahiri’s debut novel *The Namesake* is about naming, mis-naming, and renaming. At this point in the novel, its protagonist—for reasons too complicated to recount here—has changed his first name from Gogol to Nikhil. His distant cousin at the panel presentation is unaware of this change; hence the protagonist corrects him: “‘I’m Nikhil now,’ Gogol says, suddenly depressed by how many more times he will have to say this, asking people to remember, reminding them to forget, feeling as if an errata slip were perpetually pinned to his chest” (119).

This scene mirrors the author Jhumpa Lahiri's own predicament. In how many interviews has she had to explain her name, her background, and how it may or may not affect her sense of self and her writing?[17] What errata slips get pinned to her and her work by well-meaning critics and disgruntled detractors alike? The way that this scene is conveyed, however, also provides us with a means to approach questions about canonicity. Simultaneously, the protagonist identifies with and rejects the name ABCD. The curt phrasing and parallel rhythm of "'I'm Nikhil now,' Gogol says," accent the coexistence of both names, even as the protagonist seeks to cancel the latter. The scene asks us not to decide whether the protagonist is or isn't ABCD or Gogol. It encourages us to sympathize with the protagonist's conflicted emotions. We know that each of the names used in this section have their truth and their falsity, and we are the people asked to remember, reminded to forget.

*Naming Jhumpa Lahiri: Canons and Controversies* offers extensive, considered readings of Lahiri's works that help us to remember and remind us of what we may have forgotten, and often take opposing viewpoints in the debate surrounding Lahiri's writings. Most essays avoid strict hierarchies, binaries, and simplistic labels.[18] Each contributor in this volume tackles the question of Jhumpa Lahiri's popularity and canonicity as a live and urgent one.

The volume is organized into three sections. The first, "The Ethnic, the Orientalist, and/or the Universal," includes essays that take a broad view at how Lahiri's works defy simplistic categorization and suggest that scholars should be more thoughtful before including or excluding her from the various literary canons that she may seem to easily fit into. Karen Cardozo compares and contrasts Lahiri's writing and her reception among U.S. mainstream and scholarly audiences with that of Maxine Hong Kingston. She notes how Lahiri follows in the path of Kingston, who was inspired by William Carlos Williams "to write her story into 'the American grain,' to borrow from the title of Williams's poetically and politically experimental collection of essays (1925)." The essay explores how intertextuality in Lahiri's *oeuvre* functions to situate her within several literary genealogies while also serving as a powerful metaphor for ethnicity itself, particularly the complexities and "mysteries of the second-generation experience." That is, intertextual references function as bridges between the ethnic particular

and the human universal; they instantiate cultural hybridity. According to Cardozo, “In the same way that Lahiri’s protagonists are neither comfortably South Asian nor easily American in relation to discourses of ethnic or national authenticity, Lahiri’s writerly debts to Gogol and Hawthorne challenge the limits of ethnic or literary nationalism, requiring us to view her *oeuvre* in its own “third space.”

By simultaneously examining nineteenth-century colonial reading patterns of Russian literature among Bengalis in British colonial Calcutta and Freud’s theories of loss and melancholia as applicable to twentieth-century Asian American populations in David Eng and Shinhee Han’s psychoanalytical theory of “racial melancholia,” Floyd Cheung and Lavina Dhingra explain how Lahiri’s “narrational ellipses” in *The Namesake* satisfy “universal” desires of readerly aesthetic pleasure. Simultaneously, although subtly, Lahiri’s writing also participates in the political framework of contemporary Asian American and postcolonial canons, because an individual reader’s knowledge of the history of Asian immigration and exclusion in the United States deepens the understanding of the novel.

In this section’s next chapter, Rajini Srikanth furthers the debate on Lahiri’s “delectable blend of ethnicity and degrees of westernization” by cautioning against an easy universalism; she contends that *Unaccustomed Earth* offers a “comforting version of ‘difference’ within the twenty-first-century cultural norm of the United States.” Wishing “to disrupt an easy absorption of it,” Srikanth critiques Lahiri’s writings within the larger context of the politics of a “superficial” U.S. multiculturalism and the work of Evelyn Alsultany and Mitra Rastegar on the representation of veiled Muslim women in the contemporary United States.

Srikanth’s cautionary chapter offers a segue into our collection’s second section titled “Consuming Diaspora: Audience and Imaginary/Intimate Communities.” The next three chapters deal pointedly with questions of how different audiences respond to Lahiri and her works, consuming them not only as pieces of literature but also as markers of their own ethno-racial identity and cultural tastes. In “Cinema/Photo/Novel: Intertextual Readings of *The Namesake*,” Bakirathi Mani presents a literary, cinematic, and photographic reading. Hence, Mani’s chapter does not fit squarely into literary criticism and as such also demonstrates how Lahiri’s work traverses multiple contexts. In this instance, Mani examines her own and other South

Asian American audience responses to Mira Nair's film version of Lahiri's novel, as well as a photography exhibition on migration that inspired Nair; Mani ultimately argues that all three sites enable many South Asian Americans, especially those of the upper-middle class, to consider and perform their multiple positionalities, however contradictory, as ethnic Americans, postcolonial subjects, New Yorkers, and so on. Furthermore, Mani expands upon Karen Cardozo's argument in this volume to consider how Gogol's "The Overcoat" circulates in *The Namesake* as "an anachronistic historical referent," one that secures the novel's emphasis on the postcolonial subjectivities of South Asians in the United States.

As a critical counterpoint to Rajini Srikanth's chapter in this volume, Susan Muchshima Moynihan's "Affect, History, and the Ironies of Community and Solidarity in Jhumpa Lahiri's *Interpreter of Maladies*" argues against the claim that Lahiri's work is appealing due to a "universal," coherent subjectivity. In fact, Moynihan examines how *Interpreter of Maladies* artfully manages the emotions of its varied audiences and focuses attention on their "subtle and contradictory affective tensions" in order to bring "an awareness of defamiliarizing differences that politically position both characters and readers and complicate any easy notions of connection, community, and solidarity." While Rani Neutill acknowledges the importance of social and political forces, her chapter, "Intimate Awakening: Jhumpa Lahiri, Diasporic Loss, and the Responsibility of the Interpreter," continues, after Susan Muchshima Moynihan in this volume, to pay attention to questions of affect. And like Floyd Cheung and Lavina Dhingra in this volume, Neutill focuses on characters' responses to loss, albeit from a more purely psychoanalytic point of view. Drawing upon the theories of Freud and Lacan, Neutill argues that Lahiri's representation of the Partition of India and Pakistan in the several short stories in her first collection brings about not only a cultural awakening but also an opportunity for her readers to identify emotionally with the trauma of the event, as "they weep and grieve together." The final section of this book, "Gendered Ruptures and Familial Belongings," revisits a perennial controversial topic in Asian American literary studies: gender as it intersects with race and ethnicity.[19] While King-Kok Cheung may have answered her question in her classic article "The Woman Warrior versus The Chinaman Pacific: Must a Chinese American

Critic Choose between Feminism and Heroism?" to her own satisfaction regarding Maxine Hong Kingston and Frank Chin, questions of this kind remain alive as critics consider each new writer. In "Feminizing Men?: Moving Beyond Asian American Literary Gender Wars in Jhumpa Lahiri's Fiction," Lavina Dhingra places Lahiri's work in this critical tradition and makes the case that her representations of Bengali American male characters "demonstrates how Lahiri's work transcends and challenges the Asian American gender wars paradigm" of earlier "Woman Warrior"-like Bengali American writers such as Bharati Mukherjee and Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni. Situating Lahiri's texts within multiple contexts—of gendered Asian American literary critical debates, and of the British representations of Bengali colonial masculinity as effeminate, the chapter analyzes Lahiri's nuanced and empathic representation of Bengali American masculinity.

While Lavina Dhingra situates Lahiri's work in a larger debate on evolving immigrant gender roles and gender-bending, Reshmi Dutt-Ballerstadt's chapter, "Gendered (Be)Longing: First- and Second-Generation Migrants in the Works of Jhumpa Lahiri," has a narrower focus. Dutt-Ballerstadt compares male and female characters of both the immigrant and second generations in Lahiri's works, observing that many are "gendered nomads" who must "work through complex negotiations of belonging and unbelonging, identity and non-identity, learning new words and entering new worlds." Finally, Ambreen Hai's "Re-Rooting Families: The Alter/Natal as the Central Dynamic of Jhumpa Lahiri's *Unaccustomed Earth*" comes full circle by agreeing with Rajini Srikanth's chapter in this volume on the point that "Lahiri cites Hawthorne to establish her belonging in an American (New England) literary canon." In contrast, however, Hai "argues that Lahiri uses Hawthorne not only to establish her American credentials, but rather, also subtly to critique him, to suggest the difference of immigrants from Bengal." Hai defends this claim by focusing on how stories in *Unaccustomed Earth* redefine notions of family—both South Asian and North American. She points out that in her latest text, Lahiri departs from narrating stories with a single character (so successfully practiced in *Interpreter*) to alternating between narrators from different generational and gendered viewpoints in order to trace how different characters negotiate with the competing claims of families—those into which we are born and those which we choose to create. Hai argues that in

the end, while “Lahiri’s stories do not carry a radical or transformative political edge, . . . they do articulate, with poise, delicacy and sensitivity, the multiple and different problems of rerooting/rerouting from one family to another, from one culture to another, the difficulties of simultaneously retaining and forming communities.”

Each of the above chapters negotiates subtleties of categorization and analysis to do justice to Lahiri’s importance as a complex, transnational contemporary writer and to her works’ remarkable aesthetic quality. In this spirit, *Naming Jhumpa Lahiri* addresses questions such as: What is Jhumpa Lahiri’s unique contribution to the fields of American Studies and Ethnic Studies? To South Asian diasporic and South Asian American literature? To American literature? To world literature? How does her writing allow for the intersection of postcolonial, Asian American, and global cosmopolitan concerns? At the same time, how does it invite scholars to question and rethink the validity of such limiting names and academic labels? Why is Lahiri’s writing so successful among multiple audiences? How has she broken readerly expectations and transcended local and ethnic audiences in Bengal, Boston, and beyond?

## NOTES

1. Bengali is both a regional and a linguistic identification, and usually refers to the majority population of the state of West Bengal, in eastern India. Bengal was the first Indian state to be partitioned by the British in 1905 into the predominantly Hindu West Bengal and the predominantly Muslim East Bengal. During the 1947 Independence and Partition of India, East Bengal became part of Pakistan and was later separated further into the sovereign Islamic state of Bangladesh. For the benefit of her non-South Asian readers, Jhumpa Lahiri refers to this group and its history explicitly in “When Mr. Pirzada Came to Dine.” See Lavina Dhingra Shankar’s essay “Not Too Spicy: Exotic Mistresses of Cultural Translation in the Fiction of Chitra Divakaruni and Jhumpa Lahiri” for commentary on Lahiri’s history lessons and writing as a cultural translator between varied audiences. People from Bengal (whether from West or East) speak the language Bengali, which is also the name used to describe them. It is important to note that although there are large numbers of socio-economically disadvantaged Bengali immigrants (often from Bangladesh) who are settled in the United States and often operate taxi-cabs or serve as waiters at South Asian restaurants, Lahiri does not depict that population.

2. The 2010 edition of the anthology includes Lahiri’s short story “When Mr. Prizada Came to Dine,” introduced by Lavina Dhingra Shankar (3553). The only other South Asian American writer included is Bharati Mukherjee.

3. See the volume of essays *Bharati Mukherjee*: *Critical Perspectives* edited by Emmanuel Nelson, for perspectives on the earlier reception of another Bengali American writer in the United States.

Also see Lavina Dhingra Shankar's "Activism, 'Feminisms' and Americanization in Bharati Mukherjee's *Wife* and *Jasmine*."

4. For the controversial use of the term "Asian American" itself as it refers primarily to East Asians and for the conflicted history of South Asians trying to gain political and cultural visibility by naming themselves as an ethnic group, and for the overrepresentation of South Asians as "postcolonial," see Lavina Dhingra Shankar's "The Limits of (South Asian) Names and Labels: Postcolonial or Asian American?" and Lavina Dhingra Shankar and Rajini Srikanth's "Closing the Gap?: South Asians Challenge Asian American Studies."

5. For the wide diversity among South Asian immigrants and the problematic "traveling spotlight" on South Asian immigrants in the late 1990s, see Shilpa Davé et al., "De-Privileging Positions: South Asian Americans, and the Politics of Asian American Studies." In a different context, Rajini Srikanth urged at the 2010 AAAS conference plenary on South Asian American studies that "we reject vigorously the warmth of success and cultivate a posture of dissatisfaction" instead of basking in the "ethnic pride" of South Asian American success in the cultural and political arena.

6. See Susan Huber's dissertation, which studies how eleven different book clubs in Ohio responded to *The Namesake.* In April 2008, Lavina Dhingra was invited by the Foxborough Public Library, Massachusetts, to speak about Jhumpa Lahiri's fiction and about Indians in the United States. The "Town reads" program had designated a week focused on reading *The Namesake*, had created buttons on the event, were having Indian cooking demonstrations, and residents visited Providence to hear Lahiri read from her then recently published *Unaccustomed Earth*.

7. For instance, Lavina Dhingra finds that Lahiri's texts are very popular in her courses as diverse as "Modern Short Stories," "Asian American Women Writers," "Passages to and From India," and "Asian American Women Writers, Filmmakers, and Critics," at Bates, an elite liberal arts college with a majority affluent New England Anglo-American student population.

8. As Lavina Dhingra Shankar had pointed out earlier, "Since the terms 'postcolonial' and (South) Asian American' define marginalized groups while presuming the Anglo-American identity as the center, they have limited significance outside Western academic circles." Hence, her question applies to this debate, too, "What do the classifications Asian American and postcolonial as employed within the North American academy signify, anyway?" For the complexities and historical contexts of the terms Asian American and postcolonial in the United States, see Dhingra Shankar's "The Limits of (South Asian) Names and Labels: Postcolonial or Asian American?" For a critique of the term "postcolonial" as it has been used in the U.S. academy, see Jenny Sharpe, "Is the United States Postcolonial?"; Ella Shohat, "Notes on the 'Post-colonial'; and Aijaz Ahmad, "The Politics of Literary Postcoloniality."

9. Lahiri herself has said that "each of those labels is accurate," but she avoids explaining the stakes involved in owning any particular label (qtd. in Kuortti 205).

10. The global scholarly community studying and teaching Lahiri's works was apparent among the audience of the two roundtables we organized in May for the 2011 conferences of the Association for Asian American Studies (New Orleans) and the American Literature Association (Boston). The multi-racial audience ranged from graduate students from as far as Hong Kong and Europe, and scholars from Singapore. At the American Literature Association, some of the speakers specifically defended Lahiri on grounds of her cultural authenticity, as their female relatives (whether Pakistani American or Bengali British) had completely identified with some of her characters.

11. See Palumbo-Liu for essays on the evolution of ethnic American canons. See also Lauter's *Canons and Contexts,* to which we allude in our volume's subtitle.

12. This parallels the critique levied by Frank Chin against the putative consumability of popular Chinese American writers. In 1991, he claimed, "What seems to hold Asian American literature together is the popularity among whites of Maxine Hong Kingston's *Woman Warrior* (450,000 copies

sold since 1976); David Henry Hwang's *F.O.B.* (Obie, best off-Broadway play) and *M. Butterfly* (Tony, best Broadway play); and Amy Tan's *The Joy Luck Club*." The writers have defended themselves by answering that they write for themselves, and that the responses of readers and critics are not under their control. Furthermore, popularity itself is not indicative of a work's quality. As Hwang said in an interview, "The quality which annoys Frank [Chin] about this group of writers is that our work has been more commercially successful than his."

13. See Rajini Srikanth, *The World Next Door: South Asian American Literature and the Idea of America* (2004); Sunaina Maira and Rajini Srikanth, *Contours of the Heart: South Asians Map North America* (1996); Roshni Rustomji-Kerns *Living in America: Poetry and Fiction by South Asian American Writers* (1995), among numerous others.

14. For example, Maxine Hong Kingston writes, "my audience is myself" (64).

15. The narrator goes on to define deshi as "a generic word for 'countryman' [and] means 'Indian'" (118). This acronym ABCD follows in the tradition of names like ABC—American Born Chinese—which some find pejorative.

16. See Sucheta Mazumdar, "Race and Racism: South Asians in the United States"; Vijay Prashad, *The Karma of Brown Folk*. See also Lavina Dhingra Shankar and P. Balgopal, "South Asian Immigrants Before 1950" for oral narratives of early Indian immigrants who are Sikh farmers and very different from those whom Lahiri represents; and Min Song, "Pahkar Singh's Argument with Asian America" for the racialized history of the treatment of Indian Americans.

17. Like the protagonist of *The Namesake*, whose legal first name becomes his pet name Gogol, Lahiri, too, goes by her pet name, Jhumpa. Her formal full name is Nilanjana Sudeshna Lahiri. She explains, "My parents tried to enroll me in school under my good name, but the teacher asked if they had anything shorter. Even now, people in India ask why I'm publishing under my pet name instead of a real name. . . . Jhumpa has no meaning. It always upset me. It's like *jhuma*, which refers to the sound of a child's rattle, but with a "p." In this country, you'd never name your child Rattle" (Glassie).

18. And yet our contributors are aware that such labels themselves require careful definition. For example, as Heinze argues, "diaspora . . . is only one, albeit powerful, ascription available, not only for identity politics on the stage of multiculturalism but also for grappling with the complexities of literature per se. As the sole overcoat, it cannot possibly do justice to literary texts" (199).

19. Though as Lavina Dhingra Shankar and Rajini Srikanth note in their collection, *A Part Yet Apart: South Asians in Asian America*, relatively few South Asian American writers have been critiqued under this lens.

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*Part One*

# The Ethnic, The Orientalist, and/or The Universal?

*Chapter 1*

# Mediating the Particular and the General

## *Ethnicity and Intertextuality in Jhumpa Lahiri's Oeuvre*

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In their introduction to this volume, Lavina Dhingra and Floyd Cheung discuss various critical debates over how to categorize Jhumpa Lahiri's work before concluding, quite rightly, that her *oeuvre* "sheds light on *both* universal dimensions of human experience *and* more specific Bengali, postcolonial, South Asian American, and Asian American politics." But how, exactly, does this relationship between the universal and the specific work? What is its structure? In this chapter, I argue that intertextuality is a vehicle that mediates between the particular and the general, engendering Lahiri's both/and positioning. That is, the author's prominent references to texts or traditions ostensibly "outside" Bengali, postcolonial, South Asian American, or Asian American frameworks open ethnic particularities to a wider spectrum of human experience: in such moments, two or more different cultures, times, and places collide within the act of reading, enabling a negotiation between the particular and the general that renders Lahiri's work intelligible within both ethnic and "universal" rubrics.

More importantly, however, Lahiri's intertextual gestures revise the understanding of the universal as something larger than, or separate from, the specific. Rather, intertextuality reveals how the universal inheres *in* the particular: it is from specific intercultural encounters that we gain a generalizable conception of human experience. For example, far from being "only" a particular condition, postcoloniality is an inherently intertextual

structure that approaches universality—the ubiquitous story of empire written on indigenous cultures around the globe, who write back in specific ways. As such, the impulse to categorize Lahiri's work through an either/or formulation misses the point: her *oeuvre* depicts ethnic subjects (like the author herself) who have *already* been formed in an intertextual universe and thus cannot be quarantined within "original" or indigenous cultures that then serve as foils to more generalized human experience. Rather, such intertextuality is the universal form of culture itself.

As the first *second*-generation Indian American writer to receive major recognition, Lahiri's advent upon the literary scene has often been compared to the intervention made decades ago by Maxine Hong Kingston's *The Woman Warrior* (1975). The similarities are obvious[1]: in representing American-born subjects, both writers rendered mainstream visibility to groups previously marginalized in U.S. historiography or popular culture except for token and/or primarily Orientalist depictions rather than nuanced self-representations.[2] There is, however, another commonality between these two writers that has gone relatively unexplored: their explicit embrace of texts or traditions beyond their particular ethnic genealogies.

For example, elsewhere I have discussed the ways in which Kingston was inspired by the modernist William Carlos Williams to write her own story into "the American grain" (to borrow from the title of Williams's experimental essay collection). Kingston has described her mythic history *China Men* (1989) as a "sequel" to *In the American Grain* (1925), since her text picks up roughly in the mid-nineteenth century where Williams's revisionist history leaves off. In an interview, Kingston recalls his representation of the nation recovering from the Civil War: "a convulsion of bewilderment and pain—with a woman, born somehow, aching over it, holding all fearfully together" (234). She cites the inventively feminized figure of Abraham Lincoln, "a woman in an old shawl—with a great bearded face and a towering black hat," as a particular inspiration for her own gender- and genre-bending approach to imagining America (Skenazy and Martin).[3] Drawing upon theories of the essay as a form, I have argued that ethnic writers like Kingston were inspired by Williams's recognition that democracy is a *political* essay (an attempt or trial) challenged and reinvigorated by the incorporation of new immigrants who continually test

what it means to be American.[4] Kingston's reference to Williams may thus be intelligible to scholars of American ethnic literature as the familiar immigrant gesture of "claiming America," of writing oneself into the American grain.

Intertextuality is a border-crossing that opens upon new cultural and temporal territories, complicating narratives of ethnic authenticity or national purity. Thus, it is no more possible to posit a "pure" genealogy of ethnic influence than it is to situate any given text within a single, closed, frame of literary reference. As such, intertextuality serves as a powerful metaphor for ethnicity itself, particularly the mysteries of second-generation experience so aptly registered by Kingston in *The Woman Warrior*: "Chinese-Americans, when you try to understand what things in you are Chinese, how do you separate what is peculiar [to your American upbringing] from what is Chinese? What is Chinese tradition and what is the movies?" (5–6)

Here, a brief word about terminology. Literary theorists distinguish between in*ter*textuality (references between two different writers or traditions) and in*tra*textuality (references within the same writer's *oeuvre*).[5] Regarding the latter, for example, Maureen Sabine has discussed the intratextual relationship between *Woman Warrior* and *China Men*, noting that many sections of each were written simultaneously (having been initially understood by Kingston as one overarching story) and only later "sorted" by gender emphasis into the form of the books that go by those two titles. In this way, intertextuality theory destabilizes the very concept of the book, suggesting that the narrative boundaries marked by a set of covers are more porous than we might imagine. While Lahiri's *oeuvre* could be analyzed equally productively for the substantial in*tra*textual resonance therein, my primary emphasis in this essay is on her deployment of in*ter*textuality, most prominently in her choice of book titles, themselves intertexts of the framing epigraphs in *The Namesake* (2004) and *Unaccustomed Earth* (2008)—taken from works by Nikolai Gogol and Nathaniel Hawthorne respectively.

The epigraph to *The Namesake* comes from Gogol's critically acclaimed short story, "The Overcoat." Referring to the unlucky protagonist, Akaky Akakyevich, it reads as follows: "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." This excerpt underscores the intertextuality of the novel's title, which references the fact that *The Namesake's* protagonist, Gogol Ganguli, was named by his Bengali father for the famous Ukrainian writer. In both intertextual form and content, the epigraph emblematizes the tension between determinism and free will, or origins and originality, which reverberates throughout the novel and indeed, Lahiri's *oeuvre* as a whole. Is ethnic identity an inheritance that "could not have happened otherwise" or is it perhaps *not* "out of the question" that we may choose, and change, our destinies? It is in foregrounding the intertextual structure of being "a namesake"—being tethered despite one's individuality to historical and social forces of the past—that Lahiri's novel mediates between the particular and the general. That is, while this tension characterizes Gogol Ganguli's life as a second-generation Bengali American in culturally and historically specific ways, finding a workable ethic between past and future is a universal struggle that resonates for such differently located human beings as Nikolai Gogol and Jhumpa Lahiri; Akaky Akakyevich and both Ashoke and Gogol Ganguli, as well as the myriad readers who have ensured Lahiri's meteoric rise in the literary domain.

In her subsequent short story collection, *Unaccustomed Earth* (2008), Lahiri once again foregrounds a cross-cultural and intertextual relationship by drawing the book's epigraph and title from Hawthorne's fictionalized preface to *The Scarlet Letter*, "The Custom-House" (formatted here to appear as it does in *Unaccustomed Earth*):

> Human nature will not flourish, any more than a potato, if it be planted and replanted, for too long a series of generations, in the same worn-out soil. My children have had other birthplaces, and, so far as their fortunes may be within my control, shall strike their roots into unaccustomed earth.

As with her reference to Nikolai Gogol, this epigraph similarly challenges any easy presumptions about ethnic identity or literary genealogy in Lahiri's *oeuvre*. Whereas the intertextual gesture in *The Namesake* boldly situates Lahiri within an international pantheon of superlative fiction writers, this reference to Hawthorne, among the most canonized writers in American literature, seems an unabashed bid to "claim America." But at the

level of content, it offers something more complex, emphasizing the colonial narrator's awareness—despite his WASP pedigree—of the risks of genealogies that are too homogenous or parochial. The idea of breaking with tradition is, of course, a staple of ethnic or immigrant literature and, as Cheung and Dhingra argue in their essay in this collection on "the inheritance of postcolonial loss," such cultural ruptures are often melancholic. While Lahiri's work is no exception where the theme of loss is concerned, her choice of this epigraph also invites us to see migration as potentially generative. In her hands, the metaphor of "unaccustomed earth" reflects both particular Bengali-American experiences and the universal inevitability of intergenerational change, something that Hawthorne—the consummate insider—also understood.

Intertextuality, therefore, might be seen as the literary equivalent to Vijay Prashad's notion of *polyculturalism*—a paradigm that, unlike the emphasis in multiculturalism on separate cultural groups, "assumes that people live coherent lives that are made up of a host of lineages" and that our task is to "make sense of how people live culturally dynamic lives" (xi–xii). Following Robin D. G. Kelley, Prashad explains that

> polyculturalism uncouples the notions of origins and authenticity from that of culture. Culture is a process (that may sometimes be seen as an object) with no identifiable origin. Therefore, no cultural actor can [claim] proprietary interest in what is claimed to be his or her authentic culture. . . . People and cultures, from the outset [are] at the confluence of multiple heritages" (65–66).

Lahiri's emphasis on intertextual relationships engenders this multiplicity, revealing culture to be a process rather than a unitary object. As theorists of intertextuality have argued, the act of reading thus "plunges us into a network of textual relations. To interpret a text, to discover its meaning, [is] to trace those relations. Meaning becomes something which exists between a text and all the other texts to which it refers . . . The text becomes the intertext" (Allen 1).

In rendering narrative boundaries permeable (by referencing the writer's other works and/or texts outside her corpus), intertextuality destabilizes ethnic identity in its instantiation of new cultural, geographic, and temporal logics. As literary theorists have argued, intertextuality generates a "third space" in which the resonance between texts A and B generate a new text, C, in the spacetime of reading. Not incidentally, Homi Bhabha and others have also used the "third space" metaphor to describe postcoloniality,

wherein the collision of indigenous and colonial cultures generates new identities and social formations. In the same way that Lahiri's protagonists are neither comfortably South Asian nor easily American in relation to discourses of ethnic or national authenticity, Lahiri's writerly debts to Gogol and Hawthorne challenge the limits of ethnic or literary nationalism, requiring us to view her *oeuvre* in its own "third space."

And yet, herein lies a fascinating paradox: even while serving as a portal to generalizable human experience, the third space of intertextuality also functions as an apt metaphor for the specific "betweenness" of ethnic or immigrant subjectivity. As anthropologist Michael Fischer has observed, ethnicity is a "process of inter-reference between two or more cultural traditions, [whose] dynamics of intercultural knowledge provide reservoirs for renewing humane values. Ethnic memory is thus, or ought to be, future, not past, oriented" (Fischer 201). In other words, ethnicity is itself a form of intertextuality, since it is largely in reference to *them* that an ethnic *us* is produced. Here, as Werner Sollors argued in *Beyond Ethnicity* (1986), conceptions of ethnicity have long vacillated between notions of *consent* (adoption/construction) and *descent* (inheritance/essentialism). Likewise, the etymology of the term "ethnic" has alternatively signified both cultural belonging (one who shares the same cultural traditions) and foreignness (akin to "heathen," the ethnic is one outside the cultural group). The structure of intertextuality captures something of these contradictions and the boundary confusion between us and them, the inherited and the created, the fixed and the fluid. In short, there is a mutually illuminating interplay between theories of ethnicity and theories of intertextuality, and it is their productive intersection that I will now explore further before concluding with an extended analysis of *The Namesake*.

## ETHNICITY AS INTERTEXTUALITY: INSTANTIATIONS OF "DEEP TIME"

In *Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography* (1986), James Clifford observed that ethnographic writing "makes the familiar strange [and] the exotic quotidian" because it is "situated *between* powerful systems of meaning. It poses its questions at the boundaries of civilizations, cultures, classes, races, and genders, telling the grounds of collective order

and diversity, inclusion and exclusion" (203). In other words, like the ethnic experience it investigates, ethnographic writing is inherently intertextual. Clifford's formulation reflects the linguistic turn in the postmodern social sciences—the recognition that anthropology begins "with writing, the making of texts"—that countered modernist claims to the "transparency of representation and immediacy of experience" (2) and asked social scientists to reflect upon their perspectives as knowledge producers.[6]

Clifford's view of the ethnographer stands in equally well as a description of the ethnic novelist, perhaps because for both, "Literary processes—metaphor, figuration, narrative—affect the ways cultural phenomena are registered" (4). It is in this sense, Clifford argued, that ethnographic texts "can properly be called fictions in the sense of 'something made or fashioned'" rather than something "opposed to truth" (6). Here, he noted, a "new figure has entered the scene—the 'indigenous ethnographer'" (9): Michael Fischer extended this idea to other genres, arguing that "ethnic autobiography and autobiographical fiction [are also] key forms for explorations of pluralist, post-industrial, late twentieth-century society" (195).

Although writing several decades after those (like Kingston) upon whose works Fischer's observations were based, Lahiri is the indigenous ethnographer *par excellence*, writing with both keen insight and perspectival limitations. As Clifford noted, indigenous ethnographers play a complex role because "studying their own cultures offers new angles of vision and depths of understanding" yet "their accounts are empowered and restricted in unique ways" (9). Lahiri can neither comprehensively nor objectively "represent" a diverse South Asian/American population: her autobiographically informed fictions necessarily reflect particular class, geographic, and historical experiences.

In Fischer's view, the ethnic writer's "postmodern arts of memory" evince three major characteristics.

*First, such works capture the elusive nature of ethnic identity*—"the paradoxical sense that ethnicity is something reinvented and reinterpreted in each generation [and] that it is often something puzzling to the individual, something over which he or she lacks control" (195). Fischer was speaking primarily of the second-generation experience, but Lahiri's sensitivity to the nuances of first-generation experience is also exemplary in her awareness

that immigration itself—ostensibly (but not always) a choice—augurs the existential condition of inhabiting a terrain over which the immigrant lacks control. This sensibility is aptly reflected, for example, in the closing of "The Third and Final Continent," the last story in *Interpreter of Maladies*:

> While the astronauts, heroes forever, spent mere hours on the moon, I have remained in this new world for nearly thirty years. I know that my achievement is quite ordinary. I am not the only man to seek his fortune far from home, and certainly I am not the first. Still, there are times I am bewildered by each mile I have traveled, each meal I have eaten, each person I have known, each room in which I have slept. As ordinary as it all appears, there are times when it is beyond my imagination. (*Interpreter* 198)

Fascinatingly (although it is not cited in Lahiri's texts), there is another quote near the end of Hawthorne's "The Custom-House" that resonates with this articulation of the immigrant's lifelong befuddlement: "Soon, likewise, my old native town will loom upon me through the haze of memory, a mist brooding over and around it; as if it were no portion of the real earth, but an overgrown village in cloud-land. . . . Henceforth, it ceases to be a reality of my life. I am a citizen of somewhere else." Lahiri capitalizes on this recognition by Hawthorne's narrator that *all* change or mobility inevitably estranges us from the past and adapts it shrewdly for her depiction of late twentieth century Bengali immigrant experience.

Thus, as reviewers have noted, Lahiri's success, like that of any great writer, derives in part from her ability to mine the particular to illuminate the universal:

> In a crowded intellectual mart with their genre cafes, it would be easy to label Lahiri's stories as yet another variant of immigrant fiction, coalescing kindred themes of cultural hybridity and uprootedness, but the universality of her themes and emotions they conjure up lift them to a much larger dimension of human experience of finding "kinship and beauty in unexpected places." In other words, these stories, which eschew the temptation of being anything other than stories well told, could be located anywhere and speak not just to those who are familiar with the culturally schizophrenic world of immigrants. (Chand)

I would argue, however, that Lahiri's reference to Hawthorne challenges this reviewer's problematic construction of ethnic or immigrant experience as "small" against some "much larger dimension" of humanity: the surprise of her intertextual gesture lies not in its unexpected "kinship or beauty" but in the revelation that it is "not just" struggling immigrants but also the most seemingly privileged (the second-generation upper crust Bengali-American; the erstwhile nineteenth century WASP) who feel dislocated. Rather than

viewing universality as a space of unmarked or non-ethnic normativity, Lahiri's intertextuality interrogates the nebulous construction of universality itself, suggesting that the "larger dimension," too, may sometimes be a "culturally schizophrenic world."

Indeed, *all* human experience is ethnic experience in the sense that ethnicity simply signifies cultural practices and forms of belonging. While those practices differ in culturally specific ways, negotiating the terms of such belonging may be a human universal. To be clear: this is not to deny the uneven distribution of burdens and privileges across different groups and within them—the differences that enable some to belong more than others. It is, however, to suggest that the division between the particular and the general does not align cleanly with some presumed ethnic/non-ethnic distinction (as implied by David Lynn's insistence that Lahiri is playing "in the literary big leagues" and that therefore there is "nothing postcolonial" about her work—cf. editors' introduction). Lahiri's sustained deployment of intertextuality suggests that—across cultural and geographic locations—to live, to love, and to move is to be unable to hold on to tradition in any pure or uncomplicated way; the best one can do is to ascertain ethical uses of the past for the future.

*Second, the work of indigenous ethnographers highlights the novelty of second-generation ethnic identity*. As Fischer noted, "to be Chinese-American is not the same thing as being Chinese in America . . . It is a matter of finding a voice or a style that does not violate one's several components of identity [but enacts] a pluralist, multidimensional, or multifaceted concept of self: one can be many different things [and thus develop] a wider social ethos of pluralism" (196). It is precisely this kind of multivocality that intertextuality as a literary strategy enables and illustrates, revealing the robust polyculturalism of ethnic or immigrant subjectivity—indeed, *all* subjectivity.

*Third, "the search or struggle for a sense of ethnic identity is a (re-)invention and discovery of a vision, both ethical and future-oriented*. Whereas the search for coherence is grounded in a connection to the past, the meaning abstracted from that past [is] an ethic workable for the future" (196). Particularly in *Unaccustomed Earth*'s exploration of the third-generation experience (an emphasis perhaps stimulated by the author's own transition into parenthood), Lahiri's *oeuvre* can certainly be viewed as a

sustained meditation on the future of ethnic identity in America. For example, in the title story, a Bengali grandfather reflects that:

> The more the children grew, the less they seemed to resemble either parent—they spoke differently, dressed differently, seemed foreign in every way, from the texture of their hair to the shapes of their feet and hands. Oddly, it was his grandson, who was only half-Bengali to begin with, who did not even have a Bengali surname, with whom he felt a direct biological connection, a sense of himself reconstituted in another (54).

This story plays with Hawthorne's metaphor of cultivating family, of "planting" one's offspring in new territory. Ruma's father is an avid gardener who develops a bond with his ethnically mixed grandson by teaching him the activity of botanical cultivation. However, the small grandson tends to a different kind of garden in his particular New World, a plot uniquely his own in which he assiduously plants "a pink rubber ball, a few pieces of Lego stuck together, a wooden block etched with a star" (45).

Two senses of genealogy thus come together here in Lahiri's deployment of Hawthorne's agricultural metaphor—the interethnic and the intertextual. Indeed, the genetic aspect of ethnicity is simply intertextuality in the biological context: both in-group reproduction as well as ethnic outmarriage (the story's protagonist Ruma is married to a Euro-American man) yield different cultural and genetic "texts" in the bodies and cultural identities of new subjects. If, as Fischer noted, ethnic identity can seem puzzling or mysterious, that is partly because it is already a function of the often imperceptible intertextuality that Wai-chee Dimock calls *deep time*.

In *Through Other Continents* (2006), Dimock asks: "what does it mean to set aside a body of writing as 'American'?" What ways of knowing are foreclosed by forms of cultural nationalism that function as if "the borders of knowledge were simply the replicas of national borders"? Objecting to this false equivalence, Dimock undermines the linear conception of time that undergirds the nation-state as well as the formation of national literatures (2). For her, intertextual reading activates "something like a 'relativity effect': a telescoping of two time frames, yoked together, each putting pressure on the other, but remaining stubbornly apart" (132). Lahiri enacts this "relativity effect" by yoking her postmodern ethnic American subjects not only to postcolonial India but also to the "foreign country"[7] of the past—the nineteenth century worlds of Nikolai Gogol, Nathaniel

Hawthorne, and the colonial system in India that valued such texts. Such borderless intertextuality—cultural, temporal, geographic—serves as a powerful metaphor for what Fischer described as the elusive nature of ethnic identity, whose significance cannot be contained solely within a single cultural group or in the present.

In Dimock's theoretical framework, the "deep time" of intertextuality reveals "idiosyncratic relations" that result in "unexpected contact between points of time numerically far apart" (133). The same could be said of ethnic inheritance: both cultural and genetic legacies may be expressed in subsequent generations in unexpected ways that belie our historical distance from our ancestors. Lahiri's deployment of intertextuality affirms the unpredictability of cultural relations while simultaneously ensuring her own emplacement within "complex patterns of literary history that are entirely oblivious to geographical, ethnic, or political boundaries" (Kutzinski 14). Thus, in Dimock's view, "American" literature might be better understood as "a crisscrossing set of pathways, open-ended and ever multiplying, weaving in and out of other geographies, other languages and cultures. These are input channels, kinship networks, routes of transit, and forms of attachment—connective tissues binding America to the rest of the world" (3). Likewise, in Lahiri's fictional universe, ethnic identities are also "networks, routes of transit, and forms of attachment" that bind American ethnic subjects "to the rest of the world." At issue is whether or not we will recognize such polycultural ties.

If, as Fischer suggested, ethnicity is a kind of mystery located in the past whose "solution" is inevitably future-oriented, then the space of intertextuality—the new terrain instantiated when two texts generate a third—is an apt register for the processes of ethnic identity formation. As one reviewer has argued, Lahiri has a "gift for transmuting this sense of cultural dividedness into her redemptive worlds of fiction":

> "Being a foreigner is a sort of lifelong pregnancy—a perpetual wait, a constant burden, a continuous feeling out of sorts," reflects the mother who has been moved from Calcutta (now Kolkata) to Cambridge, Massachussetts, in Lahiri's novel, *The Namesake* (2003). Shuttling between three worlds—born in Britain, raised in Rhode Island and taken on long visits to India—has made Lahiri all too aware of "intense pressure to be two things, loyal to the old world and fluent in the new." (Chand)

To look more closely at how this structure of ethnic inter-reference works, I will close with a discussion of how questions of ethnicity and intertextuality, particularity and generality, play out in Lahiri's first novel.

## "WE ALL CAME OUT OF GOGOL'S OVERCOAT": MEDIATING THE PARTICULAR AND THE GENERAL

*The Namesake* tells the story of Ashoke and Ashima Ganguli, a Bengali couple who migrated to Cambridge, Massachusetts, in the late 1960s so that Ashoke could pursue a Ph.D. in electrical engineering at MIT. The novel opens with an emblematic scene that captures the inevitable cultural hybridity instantiated by migration:

> On a sticky August evening two weeks before her due date, Ashima Ganguli stands in the kitchen of a Central Square apartment, combining Rice Krispies and Planters peanuts and chopped red onion in a bowl. She adds salt, lemon juice, thin slices of green chili pepper, wishing there were mustard oil to pour into the mix . . . a humble approximation of the snack sold for pennies on Calcutta sidewalks and on railway platforms throughout India, spilling from newspaper cones. Even now that there is barely space inside her, it is the one thing she craves. Tasting from a cupped palm, she frowns; as usual, there's something missing. (1)

The snack that Ashima prepares in Cambridge refers nostalgically to one cheap and common in India and yet for which her current preparation is only a "humble approximation." Yet, whereas Ashima knows exactly what's missing, her son will also eventually come to feel that there is something missing from what metaphorically feeds him, but he will not know what. Of course, this snack also literally feeds the child *in utero*, a nutritional history of which—as with his Bengali inheritance—he will also lack memory.

But if ethnic literature so often conveys that "we are what we eat," Lahiri's intertextuality reminds us that we are also what we *read*. While the experience of immigration is commonly understood as ethnic dilution, if not dissolution, and while it is true that "something is always missing," what gets obscured in discourses of ethnic authenticity is the way that life "back home" was *already* polycultural. Lahiri's foregrounding of intertextuality, via the epigraph to *The Namesake* as well as the novel's title, requires us to confront the impossibility of ethnic purity. As Cheung and Dhingra's essay in this volume demonstrates, Ashoke's veneration of British, American, and Russian authors is a colonial legacy transmitted specifically through his grandfather, who was a professor of European literature at Calcutta

University. As Bakirathi Mani notes in her contribution to this collection, Ashoke's reading life thus bespeaks the formation of postcolonial subjectivity. His experience as a Bengali subject was already an "inter-reference" between two or more cultural traditions, to such an extent that "most of all he loved the Russians" (12). His grandfather believed that reading enabled one to "travel without moving an inch" (16) and indeed, Ashoke had wandered far from Bengal all his young life in the kind of unbounded literary excursions that his American-born son, Gogol, would be far less willing to take.

Early in the novel we learn that Ashoke had read "The Overcoat" "too many times to count" and that each time "he was captivated by the absurd, tragic, yet oddly inspiring story of Akaky Akakyevich . . . Each time, reading the account of Akaky's christening, and the series of queer names his mother had rejected, Ashoke laughed aloud . . . In some ways the story made less sense each time he read it, the scenes he pictured so vividly [becoming] more elusive and profound. Just as Akaky's ghost 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). It is here, in the way Akaky's ghost has taken up residence "deep in Ashoke's soul," that we see something of the way intertextuality mediates between the particular and the general. That is, while Ashoke's *access* to such writers is a historically specific production of postcoloniality, his *identification* with them, his *love* for them, reveals something about their ability to illuminate—in this instance—"all that was irrational, all that was inevitable about the world."

The cost of the immigrant's severance from home is crystallized in *The Namesake* through the loss of Gogol Ganguli's "true" name. Here, the novel informs us that it is traditional for the maternal grandmother to name the child; however, the letter from Ashima's grandmother went astray on its intended journey to Massachusetts and with her subsequent death, the Gangulis never find out the Bengali name intended for their son. In Bengali culture, "names can wait" (25) and "pet names" can be used in the meantime; however, this flexible cultural system collides with the efficiencies of American hospital bureaucracy: thus is the newborn protagonist hastily named "Gogol" after his father's favorite author. This choice commemorates Ashoke's survival of a horrific train wreck in India

that killed most of his fellow passengers in India: he had been reading Gogol's stories when the train derailed, and it was the fluttering pages of the book that caught a rescue worker's eye and thus ensured Ashoke's salvation (18). Upon his son's birth, "for the first time [Ashoke] thinks of that moment not with terror, but with gratitude" (28). The name Gogol thus carries all the ambivalence of ethnicity as a form of intertextuality—tied to the past yet at the same time, also hopeful and future-oriented.

"The Overcoat" is about an unassuming clerk named Akaky Akakievich, a "being who humbly endured office mockery and went to his grave for no particular reason, but for whom [at] the very end of his life, there had flashed a bright visitor in the form of an overcoat, animating for an instant his poor life, and upon whom disaster then fell as unbearably as it falls upon the kings and rulers of this world" (Pevear 419–20). As Mani argues, "Akaky's desire to inhabit a new overcoat mirrors [Ashoke's] own desire to become someone else" (7); in naming his son for the Ukrainian author, these hopes are transferred onto the second generation. Yet as Mani points out, Akaky Akakievich is itself a derivative name that foreshadows Gogol Ganguli's suspicion that he lacks a coherent identity, symbolized by his being a "namesake" rather than having been given an original name. Moreover, Lahiri's narrator suggests, Ashoke has violated Bengali cultural preference since "individual names are sacred, inviolable. They are not meant to be inherited or shared" (28). In its formal process as well as content, then, Gogol's naming bespeaks a lack of cultural authenticity: yet such intertextuality does not simply mark the son's distance from his ethnic origins but also the way the father was already a polycultural subject without ethnically "pure" origins.

*The Namesake* does not have much of a plot in the traditional dramatic sense: after we witness Gogol Ganguli's coming of age and relative estrangement from his family, along with several failed romantic relationships, the reader rightly suspects that the novel's episodic (and, as Cheung and Dhingra argue, *elliptical*) structure and melancholy tone will not resolve in any dramatic catharsis. As the novel develops, however, we encounter a narrative thread that *does* follow the classic sense of rising action that moves towards climax and *denouement*. This plot turns on the novel's implied but recurrent question, "What's in a name?" In particular, it

revolves around whether Gogol will ever understand the exchange he had on his fourteenth birthday with his father.

On that night, Ashoke gave Gogol a collection of Nikolai Gogol's short stories, a significant gift because his father had "never given him birthday presents apart from whatever his mother buys" and went to some pains to find it in hardcover, telling Gogol: "It's a British publication, a very small press. It took four months to arrive" (74). Ashoke lets his son know that he feels "a special kinship with Gogol more than with any other writer" because he "spent most of his adult life outside his homeland. Like me" (77). Interestingly, then, while Ashoke's reverence for Gogol's stories was formed in postcolonial India, it was further reinforced by his emigration, which enabled Ashoke to value Gogol's stories anew in light of the bond they share as expatriates. On the verge of telling his son the other reason, that the writer "saved his life," Ashoke reflects that a birthday is "a day to honor life, not brushes with death" and thus "decides to keep the explanation of his son's name to himself" (78). Ironically, his explanation would have perhaps enabled Gogol to despise his name less, to understand more fully the webs of significance that make it a perfect name where his father is concerned. Instead, Gogol "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" (76). Yet, although Gogol does not yet realize it, it is the "third space" engendered by this Russian name that best captures the intertextual, postcolonial, American ethnic structure of "living on the hyphen."

On his fourteenth birthday, however, instead of facilitating a deeper bond between father and son, the gift catalyzes identity destabilization when Gogol realizes for the first time that it was the famous writer's *surname* that he was given as a first name—as if it were not enough to have endured such an odd name throughout his childhood, Gogol now discovers he isn't even a proper namesake! In that fraught moment, father and son enact the following exchange:

> "Do you know what Dostoevsky once said?"
> Gogol shakes his head.
> "We all came out of Gogol's overcoat."
> "What's that supposed to mean?"

"It will make sense to you one day." (78)

What *does* it mean that "we all came out of Gogol's overcoat"? Will Gogol ever know the answer? Will we? *This* is the novel's principal intrigue and, I would argue, a major theme in Lahiri's *oeuvre* as a whole: it is a meditation on the perplexing and shifting relationship between the particular and the general, self and others, past and future. Such intertextual gestures—whether Dostoevsky's, Lahiri's, or Ashoke's—embody historically specific expressions of a universal tension between origins and originality. The cultural work of the novel thus lies in its assiduous exploration of Bengali American experience as a particular form of a more general struggle for identity—an intertextual structure that is simultaneously generative and restrictive.

The novel goes on to explore dimensions of naming and identity skillfully, noting that as a young child, "Gogol doesn't mind his name" because he "recognizes pieces of himself in road signs: GO LEFT, GO RIGHT, GO SLOW" and "It all seems perfectly normal" (66). However, this short-lived experience of the blissful normality of his "pet" name comes to an end when Gogol begins kindergarten and his parents inform him that "he will be called by a new name, a good name," Nikhil: "Not only is it a perfectly respectable Bengali good name, meaning 'he who is entire, encompassing all,' but it also bears a satisfying resemblance to Nikolai, the first name of the Russian Gogol" (56). Ultimately, it is a deeply ironic name, since, far from encompassing all, "Nikhil" comes to signify Gogol's internal compartmentalization and disconnection.

Revealing his estrangement from Bengali cultural tradition and concomitant orientation toward an American "I" that remains intact across public and private contexts, the young Gogol is "afraid to be Nikhil, someone he doesn't know. Who doesn't know him" (57). In the ultimate testament to his Americanization, the child gains power over the parent: "Nikhil" returns from his first day of school with a letter from the principal "explaining that due to their son's preference he will be known as Gogol at school. What about the parents' preference? Ashima and Ashoke wonder [but] since neither of them feels comfortable pressing the issue, they have no choice but to give in" (60).

If his first name is noteworthy in America, Gogol learns that his last name is utterly unremarkable in India, when on a family visit he is astonished to see pages of Gangulis in the Calcutta telephone directory (67). Gogol's father tells him that "Ganguli" is actually "a legacy of the British, an anglicized way of pronouncing his real surname, Gangopadhyay" (67). Thus, as Cheung and Dhingra elaborate, the surname "Ganguli" is itself an intertext—a third space created when colonialism inter-referenced the indigenous history of "Calcutta" (itself a nominal vestige of colonialism).

Later, on a "school field trip of some historical intent," Gogol finds himself in a Rhode Island cemetery where some of his classmates are "triumphant when they are able to claim a grave they are related to." By contrast, Gogol knows "there is no Ganguli here" and will never be, since he "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" (69). Asked to produce grave rubbings with pencil and paper, Gogol discovers a host of Puritan names now in disuse, yet he "likes these names, likes their oddness, their flamboyance" and realizes "that names die over time, that they perish just as people do" (70). "For reasons he cannot explain or necessarily understand," the novel tells us, "these ancient Puritan spirits, these very first immigrants to America, these bearers of unthinkable, obsolete names, have spoken to him" (71). Here, we gain further insight into the relation between the particular and the general: Gogol's recognition that both the earliest Puritans and late twentieth century Bengali Americans may ultimately share the fate of becoming "unthinkable, obsolete" serves as a reminder that although the specific cultural *content* always changes, the general *structure* of intergenerational change may be more universal in its forays into "unaccustomed earth" and the inevitable obsolescence of particular cultural norms.

Despite having fought to retain his pet name as a kindergartner, the burden of his strange Russian name eventually seems too much for Gogol, and thus, just before going to college at Yale he legally changes his name to Nikhil. Ironically, now it is his parents who feel that Gogol "has, in effect, become [his] good name," and that "It's too complicated now" to change the name (99). Nonetheless, Gogol persists and in so doing discovers both liberation as well as disorientation in the relational aspects of identity. Upon changing his name to Nikhil, he "wonders if this is how it feels for an obese

person to become thin, for a prisoner to walk free" (102). But "there's a snag: everyone he knows in the world still calls him Gogol" (103). That problem abates once he has "paved the way for a whole university to call him Nikhil" (104), which makes it "easier to ignore his parents, to tune out their concerns and pleas." But at times "he still feels his old name painfully and without warning" (105); even worse is "when his parents [call him] Nikhil, making him feel [that he is] not their child" (106). In such instances he feels "helpless, annoyed" and "caught in the mess he's made" (106).

As the novel unfolds, Lahiri continues to answer the question, "What's in a name?" in an extremely rich and multifaceted way. Her specific exploration of naming in a Bengali-American context emblematizes the tension between one's origins and search for originality: to abandon your given name is "to walk free," but also to feel "not related" to those who knew you by that name. To adopt a new name makes it easier to "tune out" the past with its web of obligations but like a phantom limb, those relationships still make themselves felt "painfully and without warning." It is this contradictory "mess" of resignation and desire that Ashoke perceived in "The Overcoat," that his son Gogol came to feel, and that countless readers of diverse backgrounds have recognized in *The Namesake*. In this way, Lahiri's sustained theme of intertextuality effectively mediates between the particular struggles of Bengali/American subjects and universal confrontations with "all that was inevitable about the world."

In Prashad's terms, we might say that Gogol was unable to embrace his own polyculturalism: with his parents, at college, and in the culture at large, Gogol is surrounded by discourses of ethnic purity, which his name has always undermined. Ultimately, the novel complicates the idea of a single or "true" ethnic identity in its many intertextual gestures. First, as I have noted, Gogol is not a proper namesake as it was the author's last name that became Gogol's first name. In turn, although Gogol doesn't realize it, "even Nikolai Gogol renamed himself, simplifying his surname at the age of twenty-two from Gogol-Yanovsky to Gogol upon publication in the Literary Gazette" (97). Finally, as Ashoke explained to his son, "Ganguli" is not the family's "real" last name either. In short, both "Gogol" and "Ganguli" are an intertextual hall of mirrors signifying that there is no "there" there—no single point of cultural origin.

What's in a name? The idiosyncrasy of Gogol Ganguli's "pet name turned good name [and] last name turned first name" is an analogue for the confusion of second-generation experience, a condition which, although also shared by siblings and peers, is nonetheless experienced by Gogol as a profound isolation: "no one [shares] his name. Not even the source of his namesake" (78). For this reason, the fantasy of finding sympathetic intimacy with a co-ethnic is a recurrent theme in Lahiri's *oeuvre*. In *The Namesake*, Gogol's relationship with Moushumi is unique because it is "the first time he's been out with a woman who'd once known him by that other name" (193). As such there is tremendous relief in being able to integrate the worlds of Gogol and Nikhil, which had been separated so arduously: "They talk endlessly about how they know and do not know each other" yet "In a way there is little to explain" (211).

In *Unaccustomed Earth* the same powerful desire is explored in the culminating trio of stories about Hema and Kaushik. Like Gogol and Moushumi, they knew each other as Bengali children thrown reluctantly together amidst the larger ethnic community. When they meet much later on as adults, it is "unquestioned that though they had not seen or thought of each other in decades, not sought each other out, something precious had been stumbled upon, a newborn connection that could not be left unattended, that demanded every particle of their care" (311). Later Hema realizes, "without having to be told, that she was the first person he'd ever slept with who'd known his mother, who was able to remember her as he did" (313).

Yet here once again, the particular becomes the general: when Gogol and Moushumi marry, "they are fulfilling a collective, deep-seated desire" (224). Any reader of both ethnic and "universal" literature knows that such hopes are hardly unique to Bengalis: their specific intra-ethnic union bespeaks a universal desire for social reproduction—to keep one's cultural community alive and growing. Ultimately, however, in Lahiri's fictional universe, such relationships are doomed: you *can't* go home again. Yet this is not so much because of the second-generation's failure to keep tradition, but because the very nostalgia of the first generation's desire to replicate home is a product of their *own* cultural infidelity—falling in love with Russian writers, leaving home despite the pleas of parents and relatives as

Ashoke did, although his parents bewailed that they had “already nearly lost [him] once”: “In spite of all that, he’d gone” (20).

Equally important, we learn through these relationship portrayals that the second-generation experience is not homogenous. Moushumi has responded differently to the same trials experienced by Gogol: “Immersing herself in a third language, a third culture, had been her refuge—she approached French [without] guilt, or misgiving, or expectation of any kind” (214). Upon visiting Paris after their wedding, Gogol suddenly “understands why she lived here for as long as she did, [away] from anyone she knew . . . Here Moushumi had reinvented herself . . . this is what their parents had done in America. What he, in all likelihood, will never do” (233). Later, when Moushumi casually blurts out among her chic (and predominantly White) friends that Nikhil changed his name, Gogol is stunned: “He has never told her not to tell anyone. He simply assumed she never would” (243). The intra-ethnic bond they shared is frayed when the story of his multiple names becomes mere small talk at a dinner party—the private space of the pet name transgressing into the public terrain where only “good” names belong. In that moment Gogol/Nikhil is more Bengali than he has ever been! Ultimately their marriage is doomed not just by this breach of confidence or by Moushumi’s extra-marital affair, but because “the familiarity that had once drawn her to him” inevitably leads her to “associate him [with] a sense of resignation, with the very life she had resisted, had struggled so mightily to leave behind” (250). Voting with her feet, she chooses originality over origins. Eventually, their time together “seems like a permanent part of [Gogol] that no longer has any relevance, or currency. As if that time were a name he’d ceased to use” (284).

Similarly, although enthralled by their newfound bond, Kaushik ultimately confronts his “cowardice” and “inability to form attachments” (326) while Hema recognizes that “she was not able to give up her life, not able to follow him that way” (322) and thus “returned to [her] existence [in] Massachusetts, thirty years after” their two families had first gone their separate ways (333). Despite a gender reversal between the two texts—Kaushik is more like Moushumi and Hema like Gogol—the lesson is the same: try as we might to preserve the ontological purity of such categories as first- or second-generation, Bengali or Bengali American, Lahiri’s depictions slip back and forth seamlessly between the particular and the

general. As Gogol recognizes, Moushumi is more like his father than himself; similarly, like Hawthorne's narrator, Kaushik, far more than Hema, considers striking his roots into "unaccustomed earth." This enables us to see how the existential diversity of the macrocosm inheres in the ethnic particular, thereby illuminating the general: human experience splits, then, not so much along an axis between ethnics and non-ethnics, but between those willing and unwilling to reinvent themselves.

As *The Namesake* closes, we learn that the "givers and keepers of Gogol's name are far from him now" (289). In the wake of his father's sudden death from heart failure and in the moment of his mother's pending relocation to India, Gogol

> wonders how his parents had done it, leaving their respective families behind [and] dwelling unconnected, in a perpetual state of expectation, of longing. . . . Gogol knows now that his parents had lived their lives in America in spite of what was missing, a stamina he fears he does not possess himself. He had spent years maintaining distance from his origins; his parents, in bridging that distance as best they could. And yet, for all his aloofness [he] has always hovered close to this quiet, ordinary town that had remained, for his mother and father, stubbornly exotic. . . . Only for three months was he separated by more than a few small states from his father, a distance that had not troubled Gogol [until] it was too late. (281)

In this moment Gogol finally begins to understand ethnic identity as a resonant intertext: the inter-referential condition of living one's life "in spite of what was missing."

During the farewell party given for his mother on the eve of her departure for India, Gogol finds himself browsing through old books in his childhood bedroom when "another book, never read, long forgotten, catches his eye.. . . *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 man who gave you his name, from the man who gave you your name' is written within quotation marks. Under the inscription, which he has never before seen, is his birthday, and the year, 1982. His father had stood in the doorway, just there, an arm's reach from where he sits now. He had left him to discover the inscription on his own, never again asking Gogol what he'd thought of the book. . . . The name he had so detested, here hidden and preserved—that was the first thing his father had given him" (288-89).

This moment is the *denouement* of the novel: finding this book, with its previously unread inscription enables Gogol to conjure his father once more and begin to really see him for the first time. Gogol realizes that while his

father was always “an arm’s reach” away, he may as well have been in the Ukraine for all that Gogol ever understood about him. Now, however, Gogol finally sees the collection of short stories as a key to understanding something about his father’s innermost life and thus, perhaps, his own.

Here, therefore, my discussion shifts back from the universalizing potential of the intertextual gesture toward the particular: Gogol’s rediscovery of an inheritance in the form of this gift from his father bespeaks the ways in which we remain bound by specific relations. As Lahiri has commented in an interview, “The original spark for the novel was to write about a boy with a peculiar name, a name that sort of plagued him.” But as she elaborates:

> In the process of writing the book, I realized that it was important and inevitable for him to accept his name, to realize that there is never a way to shed what is given to you by your parents. The book isn’t so much about names per se. It’s more about what we inherit from our parents—certain ideas, certain values, certain genes—the whole complex set of things that everyone gets from their parents and the way that, no matter how much we create our own lives and choose what we want out of life, it’s very difficult to escape our origins. (Mudge)

This tension between origins and originality is the structuring conflict not only of ethnic identity, but of identity in general—to varying degrees, all human beings find it difficult to “shed what is given” by their families.

Of all of Nikolai Gogol’s stories, “The Overcoat” was the one most admired by Vladimir Nabokov, who felt it appealed to “that secret depth of the human soul where the shadows of other worlds pass like the shadows of nameless and soundless ships” (Pevear xix). In building her novel around this intertextual relationship, Lahiri suggests that to be both specifically ethnic and generally human is to be haunted by the deep time of other continents, other lives, other names. Gogol Ganguli’s lost Bengali name, like that of his Ukrainian “ancestor,” is a soundless ship from another world; it is the shadow or hidden intertext of his American identity. In *The Namesake*, then, Gogol/Nikhil is himself an intertext: a hinge between cultures, the third text created when his father named him in America for the Ukrainian writer who saved Ashoke’s life in postcolonial India. It is only at the end of the novel that Gogol finally begins to grasp his intertextual and intercultural ties:

> In so many ways, his family’s life feels like a string of accidents, unforeseen, unintended, one incident begetting another. It had started with his father’s train wreck [that led him] to make a

> new life on the other side of the world. There was the disappearance of the name Gogol's great-grandmother had chosen for him [and then] the accident of his being named Gogol, defining and distressing him for so many years. He had tried to correct that [error but] it had not been possible to reinvent himself fully . . . His marriage had been something of a misstep [and his father's death] the worst accident of all . . . And yet these events have formed Gogol, shaped him, determined who he is. They 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. (287)

Here, the specific details of Gogol's Bengali-American life exemplify the universal lesson revealed by the Russian Gogol, of "all that it is inevitable about the world." Like John Lennon's lyric that "life is what happens while you're making plans," your ethnic identity, your real name, isn't the one you were "supposed" to have, it is the one you *do* have, since to have any other "is quite out of the question" given the particular mix of historical accidents and intentions that make up any given life.

Intriguingly, yet appropriately enough, Lahiri's narration in the final paragraphs of the novel thus switches to the future perfect tense, beautifully illustrating Fischer's point about the future-orientation of ethnic identity: "In a few minutes his mother will come upstairs to find him," saying "This is no time for books . . . unaware, as her son has been all these years, that her husband dwells discreetly, silently, patiently, within its pages" (290). But as the evening unfolds, the narrator tells us, Gogol will

> grow distracted, anxious to return to his room, to be alone, to read the book he had once forsaken, has abandoned until now. Until moments ago it was destined to disappear from his life altogether, but he has salvaged it by chance, as his father was pulled from a crushed train forty years ago. He leans back against the headboard, adjusting a pillow behind his back. In a few minutes he will go downstairs, join the party, his family. But for now his mother is distracted, laughing at a story a friend is telling her, unaware of her son's absence. For now, he starts to read. (290–291)

This is the literal ending of the book, but perhaps the beginning of an answer to our question: What does it mean that "we all came out of Gogol's overcoat?" Ashoke said his son would understand it one day, and indeed, Gogol has begun to discover for himself what binds or divides him and his father, as well as what ties them both to the universal human drama of aspiration and frustration epitomized by "The Overcoat."

In the weeks immediately following his father's death, Gogol recalled a time from his childhood when his father had led him on foot to the outermost tip of Cape Cod, where they stood "exhausted [and] surrounded

by water on three sides" (186) and his father had urged him to "remember that you and I made this journey, that we went together to a place where there was nowhere left to go" (187). In cracking open the long unused covers of the short story collection, Gogol Ganguli finally embarks on the next leg of that shared journey, a trip "through other continents."

As *The Namesake* draws to a close, Gogol Ganguli realizes what's in a name: "Without people in the world to call him Gogol [he] will, once and for all, vanish from the lips of loved ones, and so, cease to exist" (289). In the end, Gogol realizes that it is not our names but our relationship to those who call us by name that confers belonging and significance as well as immortality, if we are remembered by them. This, then, is what it means to be both a member of a particular ethnic community and profoundly human: to inherit an intertextual story that you "had once forsaken" and might not even begin to read until it is (almost) too late.

## NOTES

1. Of course, the differences between these writers are also significant. Kingston's debut dramatized the confusion of second-generation American ethnic identity through the narrative incorporation of dream, myth, and fantasy, whereas Lahiri's fiction hews closely to realism and is more aptly viewed as transnational in its sensibilities, reflecting the post-1965 era of mass South Asian immigration to the United States as well as the open-ended circuit of identification and return enacted by many *desis*.

In addition, reflecting a particular sector of largely upper middle class, educated, and professional immigrants, Lahiri's characters do not wrestle as explicitly as did Kingston's with the angst of assimilation or marginalization, although they do not escape the challenges of being "hyphenated" Americans either. Finally, whereas *Woman Warrior* was centered largely on the first-person perspective of the Chinese-American daughter, Lahiri's fictive third-person points of view from *Interpreter of Maladies* represent parents and children alternatively in convincingly empathetic ways. For example, many reviewers of *The Namesake* have argued that the novel's most fully realized character is not the second-generation protagonist highlighted in the story's title but, rather, his mother.

2. For present purposes, I will leave aside the complex question of self-representations that are themselves Orientalist. For a provocative perspective on this issue, see Ma's *The Deathly Embrace* (which includes a discussion of *The Woman Warrior*).

3. This poetic precursor resonates, for example, in *China Men*'s opening parable of Tang Ao, a male immigrant captured in "the Land of Women"—his painful feminization a metaphor for the emasculation and suffering of male Chinese immigrants in the New World: "They bent his toes so far backward that his arched foot cracked. The old ladies squeezed each foot and broke many tiny bones along the sides . . . They plucked out each hair on his face, powdered him white . . . He served a meal at the queen's court. His hips swayed and his shoulders swiveled because of his shaped feet . . . In the Women's Land there are no taxes and no wars. Some scholars say that that country was discovered

during the reign of Empress Wu (A.D. 694–705), and some say earlier than that, A.D. 441, and it was in North America" (4–5).

4. Indeed, Williams himself was a bilingual ethnic subject, although not often recognized as such: his mother, Elena, was Puerto Rican and fluent in Spanish, French, and English. See Marzan for an account of Williams's Spanish roots.

5. For introductions to intertextuality theory, see Allen, Clayton and Rothstein or Worton and Sill.

6. As Edward Said argued forcefully in *Orientalism* (1978) and as Toni Morrison dramatized through the research-oriented figure of Schoolteacher in *Beloved* (1986)—claims to scientific objectivity have often been the scholarly handmaidens of imperialism and scientific racism. The adoption of self-reflexive ethnography has, therefore, significant ethico-political dimensions.

7. Here I am thinking of David Loewenthal's *The Past is a Foreign Country*, which argued that premodern society identified with a unitary human nature of the past and felt its bearing upon the present, whereas after the nineteenth century, "It is no longer the presence of the past that speaks to us, but its pastness. Now a foreign country with a booming tourist trade, the past has undergone the usual consequences of popularity. The more it is appreciated for its own sake, the less real or relevant it becomes. . . . We enlarge our sense of the contemporary at the expense of realizing its connection with the past" (xvii).

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*Chapter 2*

# The Inheritance of Postcolonial Loss, Asian American Melancholia, and Strategies of Compensation in Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Namesake*

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As David Eng and David Kazanjian remind us, "loss is known only by what remains of it" (ix). Indeed loss pervades Jhumpa Lahiri's novel *The Namesake*. What remains are the strategies that characters use to compensate for loss, the narrative ellipses that follow crucial moments, and the traces of Asian American and postcolonial histories. Lahiri offers us a simple, elegant, and moving story, but her novel also asks us to attend to the gaps between the lines of dialogue and narration. As King-Kok Cheung reminds us, readers must listen for "articulate silences" and the "muted concrete historical situation," especially in literature by non-majority women writers (54). *The Namesake* is replete with ellipses that reveal much about the racialization of Asian Indians in America and the history of British colonization of India. We contend that Lahiri's narrational ellipses signal moments profitably analyzed using David Eng and Shinhee Han's psychoanalytical theory of "racial melancholia," which describes a state of ungrievable loss, and Alfred Adler's theory of compensation, which provides ways of making up for such loss. Specifically, we argue that critical missing contexts include the history of Asian immigration and exclusion in America and the connection between Russian writers and West Bengal. While Lahiri's novel can be placidly enjoyed without these

contexts, knowing these global historical and socio-cultural details deepens and broadens our understanding.

The contextual and narrational ellipses in *The Namesake* reinforce the theme of loss and compensation that undergirds the novel's main storylines about first-generation immigration and second-generation coming of age. What gaps in knowledge, history, context, emotion, familial connections, and so forth are created as the result of tragedy, immigration, adaptation, cultural distance, and generational difference? To what strategies of compensation do subjects turn when faced with such lacunae? These literary traces are the indicators of "remains," the only evidence of loss (Eng and Kazanjian). As Lahiri admits in an interview, "I am aware that I have somehow inherited a sense of exile from my parents," a sense marked by "loneliness, the constant sense of alienation, [and] the knowledge of and longing for a lost world" ("Conversation"). Of course, it is fruitful neither to argue about what Lahiri intended nor claim that she meant for specific elliptical moments to be silences pregnant with particular meanings. Lahiri explains that traces of loss adhere to her sense of self, and likewise, such traces mark *The Namesake*. Our role as readers, if we choose it, is to attend to the formal qualities of the text, noting for instance elisions and non sequiturs, at the same time that we consider possible contexts, drawing upon for instance relevant histories and applicable theories.

Lahiri's inheritance of loss can be understood as "racial melancholia," an Asian American psychological condition theorized by literary critic David Eng and psychotherapist Shinhee Han.[1] In their essay, "A Dialogue on Racial Melancholia," Eng and Han draw upon Sigmund Freud's distinction between mourning and melancholia, which he described thus: "Mourning is regularly the reaction to the loss of a loved person or to the loss of some abstraction which has taken the place of one, such as one's country, liberty, an ideal, and so on. In some people the same influences produce melancholia instead of mourning and we consequently suspect them of a pathological disposition" (Freud 243). Eng and Han appropriate this general idea of melancholia, de-pathologize it, and apply it specifically to Asian American experience by showing that is not a matter of individual disposition as much as social structure. They explain that while certain losses are more or less universal for all immigrants,[2] Asian immigrants are prevented from "investing in new objects—the American Dream" (352).

Even if they possess legal citizenship, stereotypes such as that of the "forever foreigner" prevent them from access to cultural citizenship (Tuan). Accordingly, until this system of racialized thinking is dismantled, Asian immigrants cannot be accepted as unquestioned members of American society. Crucially for our argument, Eng and Han note that when "the losses suffered by the first generation are not resolved and mourned in the process of assimilation [ . . . ] the melancholia that ensues from this condition can be transferred to the second generation" (352–53). This appears to be a bleak picture. Asian immigrants and their offspring cannot mourn successfully and thus are trapped in melancholy, Freud's category for those stuck in a state of grief, unable to move on.

We offer a supplement to Freud's theory by drawing upon the work of his one-time collaborator, psychiatrist Alfred Adler. While Freud concentrated on the unconscious and the realm of the sexual, Adler accented the power of the will and the realm of the social.[3] Adler insisted that individuals as social beings with free will could cope with loss by exercising, directly or indirectly, strategies of compensation.[4] On the one hand, when branded as "forever foreigner," subjects hoping to be recognized as "American" can exercise direct strategies of compensation, that is, "efforts to overcome imagined or real inferiorities by developing one's abilities" (Weiten and Lloyd 42). Such attempts, say, to learn English or become culturally competent in stereotypically American practices, may not earn full recognition as "American," but the striving itself, according to Adlerian theory, promotes the well-being of the subject. On the other hand, individuals can compensate indirectly by pursuing an alternative goal. When faced with a "disruption" or barrier to the "attainment of social reality," such as American cultural citizenship, a subject might compensate by investing in "a substitute symbol" (Wicklund and Gollwitzer 190).[5] We argue that together, Eng and Han's theory of racial melancholia and Adler's concept of compensation can help explain the psychological conditions of and choices made by characters in Lahiri's novel.

Given this theory of immigrant losses and the resulting inheritance of melancholia, we might ask how Lahiri has depicted the second-generation Asian American's experiences in *The Namesake*? What unresolved, unmourned losses of the parents have been passed down to Ashoke and Ashima's son, Gogol/Nikhil?[6] How do members of both generations

compensate? We argue that while Ashoke and Ashima have coped successfully with many losses associated with their postcolonial histories and immigration, they, nonetheless, have passed on some unresolved losses that their first-born son manages in different ways. Before considering Lahiri's characters, however, let us recount some of the contexts—U.S. and Bengali—that make their story not only an American but also a postcolonial transnational one. Filling in these elided historical and cultural contexts helps readers to appreciate more fully the significance of a text that many critics have sensed but not explained satisfactorily.

Interestingly, some American critics deny that socio-cultural contexts are missing or even relevant, while others want Lahiri to represent and confront them more overtly. For example, *Kenyon Review* editor David Lynn observes, "There's nothing postcolonial about *The Namesake*" (163). Instead, according to Lynn, Lahiri's "ambition is to play in the literary big leagues"—as if writing postcolonial literature or Asian American literature would preclude this ambition—adding that *The Namesake* succeeds to the degree that it is "old-fashioned and *literary*" (161; emphasis in original). Indeed, why shouldn't Lahiri possess this ambition? A Pulitzer Prize for her short story collection, *Interpreter of Maladies*, already evidences her ability to play in the big leagues, and during an NPR interview with Melissa Block in 2003, Lahiri gladly agreed that her work has "universal" appeal. Lahiri's ready acceptance by mainstream readers starkly contrasts previous South Asian American writers including Ved Mehta, Bharati Mukherjee, or Meena Alexander, among others.

In "The Limits of (South Asian) Names and Labels: Postcolonial or Asian American?" Lavina Dhingra Shankar asks provocatively: "can subalterns name themselves? [ . . . ] Or, do individuals or groups who reveal their agency by naming themselves forfeit their subordinated status? [ . . . ] If South Asian Americans' voices are now being heard in the academy, does it signify that they are being invited (or allowed) to speak? [ . . . ] And, under what categories—South Asian, postcolonial, or Asian American—must their voices be classified in order to be heard?" (52). With savvy, Lahiri seems to negotiate among several labels. While Adelle Waldman observes, "Lahiri's books are more about the coastal elite experience than they are about the Indian-American one," Sarite Sarvate claims that Lahiri has "not relinquished the colonial prism," and that her work "explores familiar

themes of arranged marriages, Hindu traditions, and extended families."[7] Perhaps *The Namesake* succeeds because it eloquently, perceptively, and subtly sheds light on *both* universal dimensions of human experience *and* late-twentieth-century postcolonial and Asian American politics—a possibility explored across Lahiri's oeuvre as discussed in Karen Cardozo's essay in this volume.[8]

*The Namesake* begins with a scene with which female readers of varied ethnicities may identify, yet the historical and cultural specificities are also critical. Ashima Ganguli, who has left her parents' home to follow her husband to Cambridge, Massachusetts, craves a particular comfort food. Like many displaced women, she misses her natal home as she prepares for motherhood in a foreign land.[9] Ashima's name means "without borders," but the specific borders and her particular reason for crossing them are significant.[10] Ashima is from Calcutta, the year is 1968, and her husband is studying to be an electrical engineer at MIT. Only three years previous to this fictional scene, the U.S. Congress passed an immigration reform bill that lifted a host of legal restrictions aimed at preventing most Asians from coming to the United States.[11] Furthermore, the 1965 bill, while lifting restrictions, established preferences for admitting certain kinds of immigrants, for instance those like Ashima's husband Ashoke, who possessed advanced professional skills that were highly desired in America at the time, especially as the U.S. sought to make advances in the sciences during the Cold War. Hence, Ashoke and Ashima's very presence in America in 1968 has everything to do with specific cultural and legal histories.

The first wave of South Asian immigration during the turn of the twentieth century included only about 6,400 Indians. The Barred Zone Act of 1917 had cut off further immigration.[12] The logic of exclusion used by the Supreme Court was that while the "children of English, French, German, Italian, Scandinavian, and other Europe parentage, quickly [ . . . ] lose the distinctive hallmarks of their European origin," Indian immigrants could never assimilate fully into American life. In the 1920s, Bhagat Singh Thind, an Indian immigrant who arrived in the United States before 1917 and even fought for the U.S. army in World War I, applied for naturalized citizenship, but the Court ultimately argued that his "racial difference" was insurmountable:

> It is very far from our thought to suggest the slightest question of racial superiority or inferiority. What we suggest is merely racial difference, and it is of such character and extent that the great body of our people instinctively recognize it and reject the thought of assimilation. (*United States v. Bhagat Singh Thind*, 261 U.S. 204)

Despite his own sense of himself as American, his demonstrated U.S. patriotism, and his intense desire to choose the name of "American citizen," the Court denied Thind's application. It would take until 1965 to lift this ban on the Indian immigrants and enable them to become naturalized citizens. Hence, the second wave of immigration from India began during this period, and initially, those with advanced technical skills were granted preference. Ashoke's promise as an engineer thus enabled him to migrate to America in 1968. The specter of Thind's rejection by the Supreme Court, however, and traces of the assumed unassimilability of Asian Indians haunt Ashima and Ashoke Ganguli, even if they are unaware of this history. That they proceed in life with the seeming ignorance, denial, or quiet acceptance of this lost or repressed *American* history is perhaps one way that first-generation Asian immigrants have compensated, survived, and in some cases thrived in the United States.[13]

The psychological costs of a model minority's repressing its racialized immigration history, however, may be passed down to the second generation and, perhaps, be connected to past colonial history. In Lahiri's novel, the central signifier of what is passed down from generation to generation is Gogol's Russian namesake. It is significant that Ashoke's grandfather, "a former professor of European literature at Calcutta University" (12), in early twentieth-century British-colonized Calcutta, begins this process of transmission of the veneration of Nikolai Gogol—the source of Gogol Ganguli's name. We argue that this transmission has everything to do with the postcolonial condition of India and of Calcutta in particular. The historical and psychological link to the Russian namesake, and by extension other great Russian writers, passed down via three generations in India and one in America points both to what is lost and what remains as compensation via colonialism and immigration.

## READING THE ELLIPTICAL IN *THE NAMESAKE*

Traces of loss inhabit the spaces in between, those elliptical moments that serve as a silent transition between one scene and the next. Sometimes these

narrative moments occur within a chapter, and sometimes between chapters. Always the press of the unspoken calls for readers to imagine what is lost, to make a connection between what is present and what is absent. These elliptical moments ask us to think about the relationship between what is on the page and what is missing. If we do not pay attention to these moments, then we run the risk of perpetuating loss, and knowing "only half the truth" (Lahiri 75). As Judith Caesar rightly notes, Lahiri's novel works "to evoke meanings rather than convey them" (106). Lahiri establishes powerful scenes, juxtaposes them with seemingly unrelated ones, and remains silent. Depending on the scene and the reader, one might recall a relevant historical context to produce additional meaning.[14]

Lahiri's narrative ellipses lead us to ponder the connection between postcolonial loss and Asian American melancholia. Not surprisingly, in a book called *The Namesake*, we are meant to reflect constantly on the significance of names and their relationship to identity and the meaning of home. Near the end of chapter 3, Lahiri performs an ellipsis to powerful effect. By the time Gogol is age ten, we are told, he has visited Calcutta, his parents' native home, three times. He is amused to learn that while his last name, Ganguli, is rare in America, there are "six pages full of Gangulis, three columns to a page, in the Calcutta telephone directory" (67). Ashoke tells Gogol that "Ganguli is a legacy of the British, an anglicized way of pronouncing his real surname, Gangopadhyay" (67). This statement ends a paragraph and creates an elliptical moment before the next, which begins almost cinematically, "Back home on Pemberton Road . . ." (67). This segue also explicitly locates the Ganguli family as not at home in Calcutta, where others with their name are abundant, but at Pemberton Road in suburban Massachusetts, where their name seems so foreign that it becomes the target of racist violence on a mailbox.[15]

Lahiri highlights the significance of individual and family names that are inherited, lost, or translated, and whose meanings shift based on geographic and historic contexts. Here, Ashoke teaches both his American-born son and Lahiri's American readers colonial history: British colonization took not only his original home in Calcutta but also his "real surname." In fact, the name Gangopadhyay has a specific meaning that is lost to both Gogol and Lahiri's non-Bengali readers.[16] Yet Lahiri leaves readers to fill in the history of Bengal during British colonial rule—that Calcutta was the first

capital of the British Empire in India until 1912, when it was moved to Delhi; and that British trade settlements (which led to colonialism) began in Bengal as early as 1685 (Martin 6). As nineteenth- and early twentieth-century, western-educated Bengalis assimilated into the colonial machinery as British civil servants and administrators (whether in India, the UK, or in other British colonies including the Caribbean), they truncated their last names that were difficult to spell and pronounce (not dissimilar to Polish, Russian, German, and other immigrants in the U.S.). Hence, the Mukhopadhyays renamed themselves (or were renamed by colonial masters?) as Mukherjees; the Bandyopadhyays became the Banerjees; the Gangopadhyays became the Gangulys (spelt variously ending with a "y" or an "i"), and so on. These changes also obscured matters of identity, since usually names signified occupational or caste status.[17] In fact, the suffix "-opadhyay" signifies membership in the Brahmin caste, and the original meaning of Gangopadhyay is "teacher from the village of Ganga" (Hankin 172). Yet, neither Ashoke nor the novel dwells on this historical postcolonial loss of native Bengali names and identity. Instead, the narrative moves on to a scene depicting Asian American melancholia.

"Back home on Pemberton Road," we observe Gogol and his father pasting "individual golden letters [ . . . ] spelling out GANGULI on one side of their mailbox" (67). They do this with care, one imagines. It is a matter of their home, their name, their identity as Bengalis and Americans. The golden, uppercase letters are valuable. The morning after Halloween, however, Gogol discovers that someone has defaced their mailbox and name, changing GANGULI to GANGREEN. Gogol's "ears burn at the sight, and he runs back into the house, sickened, certain of the insult his father will feel" (67). He connects this "desecration" with the condescension, if not racism, he thinks that his parents endure each time that sales clerks smirk at his parents' foreign accents (67).[18] Yet, Ashoke surprises Gogol with apparent nonchalance: "he is unaffected by the mailbox. 'It's only boys having fun,' he tells Gogol, flicking the matter away with the back of a hand, and that evening they drive back to the hardware store, to buy the missing letters again" (68).

Ashoke has learned to cope with loss by dismissing it and carrying on. Perhaps it is because the immigrant generation accustomed to multiple kinds of losses—of birthplace, home, homeland, family, traditions, mother

tongue, and so on—finds the loss of a mailbox trivial in comparison with the larger losses of their past that they feel life in the United States has more than enough compensated. Or, perhaps, Ashoke—who as a young man had nearly lost his life in a train accident—cannot bring himself to fret over any other, obviously lesser, loss. Instead of mourning, Eng and Han might say, Ashoke denies that there is anything to mourn. Just as he does not comment on what is lost in the imperial transformation from Gangopadhyay to Ganguli, he does not dwell on what is lost in America when someone alters it from a last name, Ganguli, to a condition characterized by the death (and loss) of bodily tissue, gangrene—something untouchable, dirty, and contaminating.[19] Certainly, however, the American-born Gogol feels the loss. His ears burn. This is the melancholia borne by the second generation when the first generation fails to mourn. Ashoke does not confront loss and moves on quickly to investing in new objects—a new spelling of the family name, new golden letters, a new family, a new job, a new country to call home and in which he will die. Even if he does not recognize that he is not being fully accepted by his new country, he goes right back to trying, to the hardware store to buy new letters, to re-establish his family name on the mailbox planted on American soil.

Gogol, in contrast, grew up in America with different ideas about identity and justice, and he is confused and frustrated by his father's strategies of compensation for dealing with loss. He, like so many of the second generation, is at once protected and made ignorant by the seeming nonchalance of the first. In this elliptical moment, readers imagine that the mailbox will be repaired, but may also wonder whether it will be defaced again. Despite Lahiri's work being branded as "apolitical,"[20] readers cognizant of the history of racial violence against Asian Americans understand that seemingly harmless baseball bats, normally associated with "boys having fun," were used in the beatings of Vincent Chin and others. Thus, Gogol's loss reminds us of the potential violence intrinsic to establishing one's foreign name and identity in the land of milk and honey; of the American history that Ashoke and most model-minority Asian Americans are blind to, what Richard Slotkin called the American nationalist search for identity and "regeneration through violence."[21]

Again, in her signature narrative ellipsis, Lahiri deftly juxtaposes a scene where an American child is distressed because his foreign-sounding family

name is defaced on a mailbox with a scene about Gogol's sixth-grade school trip to a cemetery where he had searched futilely for his family name, a failed attempt at metaphorically grounding himself and his family on American soil. Rather than explain Gogol's deeply felt melancholia at his missing family name, Lahiri lets readers understand that the second-generation boy cannot find his ancestral name on gravestones not only because his family has no past history in the new country; but also as Hindus who will be cremated (and whose ashes will be returned to the holy river Ganges) they will leave no remains tying their name to their lives in America: "his body will occupy no plot of earth, that no stone in this country will bear his name beyond life" (69). Gogol's frustration regarding the defacement and effacement of his family name, then indirectly, recalls the loss of his family name incurred in the past. Furthermore, as Gogol contemplates that he will not leave his name, a physical mark, on *his* native country, Lahiri foreshadows the sudden, unexpected death of his father in the novel's second half, which will lead Gogol on a search for his Bengali identity and eventual acceptance of his Russian namesake.

## THE RUSSIAN CONNECTION: A GENDERED POSTCOLONIAL INHERITANCE

Lahiri's protagonist's name is neither a coincidence nor a cipher. But rather, Lahiri's invocation of the Russian author after whom he was named evokes historical and cultural connections that, perhaps, even the American-raised author and most of her readers may be unaware of, but which lie just under the surface to compensate, incompletely and always complexly, for the losses colonialism and immigration caused. At the least, Russian literature and Soviet political ideology provide additional, if not an alternative to British, sources of inspiration and tradition. Cultural connections, vexed as they are, run deep between not only India and Britain but also India and Russia.

Although Lahiri does not dwell on it, she provides elliptical hints of colonialism's effects on individual identity. British colonialism in the nineteenth century, obviously, influenced the reading habits of educated middle-class Bengalis and other Indians in the twentieth century—the grandfather whose library Ashoke Ganguli inherits; the father whose library

Gogol benefits from, the American college library that may have been Lahiri's playpen—and made them all cosmopolitan world citizens. The Bengalis were among the first English-educated people in India, and Calcutta University was founded in 1857 (Martin xxi). Lahiri's father's position as a university librarian in Rhode Island may have allowed her easy access to books, including by Russian writers such as Nikolai Gogol, uncommon in average Anglo- or Asian American households.

In her fascinating study *In Another Country: Colonialism, Culture, and the English Novel*, Priya Joshi observes about nineteenth-century India that

> Indians in the British Empire never really seemed to read at all. This is the conclusion one might draw from the popular and pervasive accounts of India and Indians in the British novel. [ . . . ] Not surprisingly, a very different India emerges from the words of Indians themselves and even from the pens of British colonial officials [ . . . ] Far from being the India of caves and mosques, this India is one in which Indians passionately, powerfully, and persistently read—and often wrote—seemingly everything that the empire of print purveyed and made available [ . . . ]. (35–36)

The educated middle-class colonial and postcolonial India of which Lahiri provides momentary glimpses thus reflects Joshi's research.

Inderpal Grewal discusses Amitav Ghosh's 1998 essay "The March of the Novel through History: The Testimony of my Grandfather's Bookcase" in a manner that can also illuminate Lahiri's novel. Grewal observes that Ghosh's understanding of cosmopolitanism through the circulation of international literature in the second half of the twentieth century is "as much about placement as about displacement" (45). Thus, "for Ghosh, the growth of the Bengali middle class, educated in English, with access to a set of books sanctioned as 'great literature' by the institution of the Nobel Prize, produced a cosmopolitanism that was nationalist in its allegiance to place (of belonging to Calcutta and Bengal and India in the case of Tagore), [ . . . ] a somewhat different idea of internationalism from that of the 'world citizen'" (46).

Jhumpa Lahiri's depiction of Ashoke Ganguli's reading habits and of his grandfather's library almost echoes Amitav Ghosh's, thus explicitly revealing this phenomenon—of attaining cosmopolitanism while being rooted in a native geographic location. As Ashoke states, his grandfather is a proponent of "armchair tourism." When urged by his fellow passenger in the train (also named Ghosh) to travel and see the world, Ashoke replies

rather sanguinely: "'My grandfather always says that's what books are for' [ . . . ] 'To travel without moving an inch'" (16).

Grewal also rightly points to the gendered nature of these reading habits that created an international literature in the postcolonial India (and Calcutta), which both Amitav Ghosh and Jhumpa Lahiri evoke literally and figuratively through the Bengali "grandfather's bookcase":

> this cosmopolitan internationalism is gendered as a masculine articulation, since Ghosh's grandfather's bookcase found its reader in Ghosh himself rather than any of his female relatives. The cosmopolitan world of connections remained one of connections between males, maintained and produced patriarchally by the 'grandfather's bookcase' as a legacy to the grandson, Ghosh. The legacy was, in Ghosh's account, crucial to his sense of himself as an author who could be read in many parts of the world and to his insertion into a world that could move him away from the site of reading and the bookcase to other national cultures described in the books that he read as a child, to an international discourse of literature and literariness. (47)

Jhumpa Lahiri's novel also reveals this gendered passing on of names, literary knowledge, and, hence, a cosmopolitan literary identity from Ashoke's grandfather's bookcase to Ashoke's book-filled suitcase on the train, to Gogol's inheritance of the name of the male Russian writer so important in the lives of his paternal ancestors.[22] It is ironic, or perhaps intentional, that the American-born Ganguli child's name that was supposed to have been a matrilineal legacy—via the mother's grandmother's letter in the original Bengali-familial Calcutta context—is upturned due to immigration. Hence, what actually gets passed on (and compensates) is the name of the American boy's father's grandfather's beloved Russian male writer.

Thus, without explicitly commenting on it, Lahiri demonstrates that the transmission of knowledge of English and European literatures was gendered. Despite Ashima's having tutored neighborhood children in Tennyson and Wordsworth, Aristotelian and Shakespearean tragedy (7), she had not internalized the colonial literature as much as Ashoke had, and is embarrassed at her ungrammatical spoken English. Thus, while Ashoke can educate American college students, Ashima, whether living in her Cambridge apartment or at Pemberton Road, can never feel herself to belong intellectually or culturally in England or America, but rather relocates herself imaginatively in Calcutta. Not surprisingly, she clings to her "tattered copy of *Desh* magazine that she had brought to read on her plane ride to Boston and still cannot bring herself to throw away. The

printed pages of Bengali type, slightly rough to the touch, are a perpetual comfort to her. She's read each of the short stories and poems and articles a dozen times" (6). One might read Ashima's behavior as that of a "melancholic" in Freud's term, as she is literally and figuratively unable to let go of an object from the past, just as she is as yet unable to psychologically step out of and let go of the lost home that the magazine named *Desh* (translated as "native country") symbolizes. As the novel progresses, however, Ashima begins compensating for her loss by playing the role of the immigrant mother who preserves homeland culture, usually via cooking food, speaking language, or retelling stories associated with the homeland. Like a traditionally good diasporic mother, she balances her roles as cultural preserver and as nurturer in the new world. Here, we witness a version of Aihwa Ong's transnational, flexible citizen.

In contrast, even as a young man in Calcutta, Ashoke Ganguli was raised on a cosmopolitan diet of English and European literature and, hence, does not reveal the sort of quasi-melancholic clinging to Bengali culture that Ashima does. Like Amitav Ghosh's grandfather, Ashoke's grandfather's library of European literature formed his identity. Ghosh begins his essay with statements that could have been made by Ashoke—thus reminding us of the postcolonial condition that Lahiri's characters embody that is not merely unique to the individual Bengali immigrant:

> As a child I spent my holidays in my grandfather's house in Calcutta, and it was there that I began to read. [ . . . ] The walls of my grandfather's house were lined with rows of books, neatly stacked in glass-fronted bookcases. The bookcases were prominently displayed [ . . . ]. They let the visitor know that this was a house in which books were valued; in other words, that we were cultivated people. This is always important in Calcutta, [ . . . ] an oddly bookish city. (287–8)

Ghosh then describes the books and affirms that the Ganguli household's love of Russian literature was also ubiquitous among the Bengali middle-classes in the 1950s and 1960s, and that only "a quarter" of the books were in Bengali:

> The rest were in English. But of these only a small proportion consisted of books that had been originally written in English. The others were translations [ . . . ] most of them European: Russian had pride of place, followed by French, Italian, German, and Danish. The great masterpieces of the nineteenth century were dutifully represented: the novels of Dostoevsky, Tolstoy, and Turgenev, of Victor Hugo, Flaubert, Stendhal, Maupassant, and others. (290)

Although he does not mention Nikolai Gogol, Ghosh also implies that Bengali Russophilia was related to their Marxist leanings, after independence from the British:

> Other names from those shelves have become, in this age of resurgent capitalism, symbols of a certain kind of embarrassment or unease—the social realists, for example. But on my uncle's shelves they stood tall and proud, Russians and Americans alike: Maxim Gorky, Mikhail Sholokhov, John Steinbeck, Upton Sinclair. (291)

Ironically, then, the Russian literature so beloved to the Bengalis may have been lost to them were it not for the English translations, the colonial language of loss and compensation.

## RUSSIAN LITERATURE IN INDIA: "HINDU-RUSEE BHAI BHAI" (HINDUS/INDIANS AND RUSSIANS ARE BROTHERS)

The cosmopolitan Bengali's Russian intellectual heritage thus provides a foil to the presumed British or American literary ancestry. In a 2003 interview, when her work is described as "Chekhovian," Lahiri herself admits: "I love Russian writing and the richness of classic nineteenth-century Russian writers. I have a deep affinity and respect for them and try to learn a lot from that tradition" (Nawotka 49). What Lahiri presents as an individual's passionate admiration for a single author is actually related to a socio-cultural phenomenon of Russophilia following India's decolonization. Throughout the twentieth century, there has been a long-standing relationship between Indians and Russian literature, and particularly between Bengal and Russia. For most of the years since its formation in 1964, the government of West Bengal has been ruled by CPI(M)—the Communist Party of India (Marxist), which aligned itself with the Soviets (Martin 118).[23]

In a 1966 article entitled "Russian Studies in India," A. R. Chakraborty argues in favor of expanding the Russian curriculum in post-British India, both as a counterpoint to the British influence, and to train interpreters and translators due to the growing economic and cultural relations with the Soviet Union, and perhaps, as the new nation tried to form alliances with another major power. He argues that historically Russian literature was studied in India "not so much for its literary value as for its political implications." Although he does not mention Gogol, he states that "some of

the greatest Russian writers (for example, Tolstoy, Turgenev, and Gorky) were translated into Indian languages" (297).[24] At the height of the Cold War, the Bengali scholar argued in favor of the Ministry of Education's establishing the Indian Institute of Russian Studies and Russian departments in universities (300–301).

This literary partnership between India and Russia is being revived again in the twenty-first century. Ipsita Chakravarty reports that although a generation of Indians had grown up reading Russian literature in translation, that had disappeared after the end of the Cold War. In 2008, Russia was made "guest of honour" at the 18th World Book Fair in Delhi, which 100 Russian delegates including 20 Russian authors and poets attended, hoping "such lore might indeed find its way back into the Indian consciousness." According to Nuzhat Hussain, director of the National Book Trust, the Central government designated 2008 as "the year of strengthening ties between India and Russia," and schools, universities, and publishers collaborated, and contemporary Indian writers and scholars met Russian writers and publishers.

It almost seems as if not only Jhumpa Lahiri, but Indian readers, writers, and the government are realigning with Russia and Russian literature and culture, perhaps, as a counterpoint to American hegemony in the twenty-first century. Or would it be too venturesome to say that Jhumpa Lahiri's use of the Russian author's namesake for her protagonist (and the Calcutta-born filmmaker Mira Nair's film rendition of the novel) has brought Russian literature to the foreground of the imagination of the Indian intellectual elite? Is it, perhaps, a reminder of Gogol's great-grandfather's advice in the colonial Calcutta setting more than half a century earlier: "'Read all the Russians, and then reread them' [ . . . ] 'They will never fail you'" (12).

As Ashoke reads a month-old *Boston Globe* in the hospital waiting room awaiting the birth of his son, he reminisces about his intellectual formation and acknowledges his patrilineage:

> 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 favorite stall on College Street with pujo money. But most of all he loved the Russians. His paternal grandfather, a former professor of European literature in Calcutta University, had read from them aloud in English translations when Ashoke was a boy. Each day [ . . . ] for an hour his grandfather would read supine on the bed [ . . . ] Ashoke curled at his side. For that hour Ashoke was deaf and blind to the world around him. [ . . .

> ] “Read all the Russians, and then reread them,” his grandfather had said. “They will never fail you.” When Ashoke’s English was good enough, he began to read the books himself. (12)

Throughout her novel, Lahiri neither explains the history of British colonialism nor mentions what Bengalis in the 1950s and ’60s had lost via British colonialism and how they compensated for it with such a strong affinity for Russia or Russian literature. Instead, we read that Ashoke had read *The Brothers Karamazov, Anna Karenina*, and *Fathers and Sons*, and that his mother was convinced he would be hit by a bus or tram as he walked the crowded Calcutta streets reading *War and Peace* (13). When the fateful train accident occurs, we are told Ashoke is traveling to Jamshedpur with an empty suitcase to read Dostoyevsky and Tolstoy to his recently blinded grandfather and to materially inherit his literary estate:

> the books in his glass-fronted case, collected over a lifetime and preserved under lock and key, would be given to Ashoke. The books had been promised to Ashoke throughout his childhood, and for as long as he could remember he had coveted them more than anything else in the world. He had already received a few in recent years, given to him on birthdays and other special occasions. But now that the day had come to inherit the rest, a day his grandfather could no longer read the books himself, Ashoke was saddened [ . . . ]. (13)

Lahiri thus intertwines the grandson’s excitement at his material and intellectual gains with his sadness at the impending loss of his grandfather. She also explicitly links the inheritance of names with literary tastes and reading habits, intellectual identity, and intergenerational cultural capital. In this scene at the beginning of the novel, she foreshadows the ending where Gogol finally accepts his paternal inheritance and starts reading the book that was his father’s gift on his fourteenth birthday. The Russian book’s relationship to Ashoke’s own Bengali adolescence and his relationship with his grandfather is thus provided in one of the first scenes, even though this historical fact is not explicitly linked later in the novel when the Russian author is mentioned only in reference to the train accident. We are told that on his fateful and potentially fatal journey, Ashoke carried a hard-bound volume of collected stories by Nikolai Gogol, “which his grandfather had given him when he’d graduated from class twelve. On the title page, beneath his grandfather’s signature, Ashoke had written his own” (13–14).

As Ashoke signs his name below his grandfather’s, he gratefully acknowledges his patrilineal (and postcolonial) legacy and claims possession of the book as his own. Perhaps, Lahiri implies that,

metaphorically, Ashoke's ready acceptance of his familial/Russian intellectual roots saves his life, and later his son's psychological health. The juxtaposition of these scenes is significant as Lahiri demonstrates Ashoke's rite of passage from being a beloved grandson to becoming a father who will himself pass on both his grandfather's name and his inherited passion for Russian literature to his American son, born in the USA—which, at the height of the Cold War, demonized all things Russian like nothing else. Yet, the author mentions neither the Cold War nor the Bengali-Russian bond.

Russian literature nevertheless provides a postcolonial legacy, one that is neither British nor American. This tradition represents an alternative politics and worldview from a different superpower. It provided Marxism, an alternative to Western ways of seeing the world. Assimilation into dominant U.S. and British narratives is not the only alternative. "Gogol," serving as a first or as a last name, is insistently Russian and strange. Hence, Lahiri encourages us to imagine affiliations beyond just fitting in a typical British, American, or even Indian context. The Soviet connection provides an alternative for Calcutta. And Gogol is a placeholder for alternatives for Asian Americans: there is no demand to be assimilated or allied with racialized heritage; other inheritances are possible, such as a literary one or an idiosyncratic one. Reading and rereading a Russian author saved his father's life; everything since has been a gift.

Perhaps, the novel's ending suggests that by finally accepting his Bengali father's cosmopolitan legacy, Gogol will let go of the melancholia that he had harbored since his father's death and the "racial melancholia" so common among Asian American youth, to use Eng and Han's term. His solitary reading of his father's (and as the reader knows, his great-grandfather's) favorite Russian book, is also the first moment where he opens the book to understand his family's colonial past, his immigrant/American life, the inscription from his father, and can thus be compensated by his patrilineal inheritance of male Russian literature.

## GOGOL'S COMPENSATIONS: FROM RECALCITRANCE TO READING

The West Bengal that Ashoke leaves in the 1960s was torn by strife because of the alliances between the newly engaged Marxist government and the

ultra-radicals from Naxalbari.[25] According to historian David Martin, “The turbulent years from 1967 onwards, had greatly dislocated life everywhere in West Bengal, but never more so than in Calcutta.” Although rural life improved, “the senseless and unwarranted damage done to industry and to business confidence, set things back for everybody in West Bengal” (119). Like other highly educated, professionally trained Bengalis in the 1960s, Ashoke leaves India and, hence, chooses a certain amount of loss for the promise of some gain. As we know, he successfully invests in his new life in America as a professor and family man. While Ashima’s loss is different from Ashoke’s, she balances hers with investment, too, as wife and mother. She ultimately compensates for not living in Calcutta full-time by visiting there often (later in her life spending half of every year there like a transnational version of Persephone).

In contrast, Gogol, the Asian American melancholic, has much difficulty compensating for his losses, partly because he is unaware of them, having inherited them silently from his parents, and partly because he resists the strategies of compensation that some expect of him. Min Song rightly describes Gogol as “a child laden [ . . . ] by the allegorical expectation that he will achieve the future that he supposedly already embodies” (355–56). Indeed, Gogol resists his family’s and society’s expectations, appearing passive and recalcitrant through much of the novel. Even as a baby, Gogol refuses to participate in a ceremony meant to divine his destiny. Several items including a pen representing a career as a scholar and a dollar bill predicting a career as a businessman are placed before him. Lahiri’s narrator explains, “Most children will grab at one of them, sometimes all of them, but Gogol touches nothing” (40).

Like these items on a tray, Gogol’s girlfriends represent possible paths for his identity development.[26] While they are realistic characters, they also serve as symbolic points of entry into different parts of American society. If the Asian American melancholic suffers from inherited loss and racialized exclusion, connection to a community or subculture through a romantic partner is one way to compensate. For example, Gogol’s relationship with Maxine promises to yoke him to the WASP establishment, and his marriage to Moushumi serves as an attempt for them both to fulfill the expectations of their Bengali immigrant parents. Ultimately, however, none of Gogol’s romances lasts.

While in college, Gogol could have compensated by joining a community of other second-generation, South Asian Americans at Yale.[27] But instead Gogol wishes to escape definition almost to the point of dis-identification. He spurns his Bengali-American identity by avoiding a stereotypical major in the sciences; and he initially dates only Anglo-American women. Gogol "avoids" South Asian American friends "for they remind him too much of the way his parents choose to live, befriending people not so much because they like them, but because of a past they happen to share" (119).

Unhappy in love and unwilling to find companionship in his ethnic peers at college, Gogol comes only slightly closer to compensating for loss via his career path. While Gogol inhabits a kind of "obstinate passivity" in many regards, his choice to become an architect is relatively active (Song 356). He has a talent for drawing early in the novel (Lahiri 66). And while Gogol is ambivalent, if not altogether apathetic, about connecting to his South Asian cultural heritage by listening to classical Indian music or socializing with his parents' friends, he is mesmerized by the Taj Mahal: "No other building he's seen has affected him so powerfully" (85).[28] Through studying this building, we surmise, Gogol can relate to his heritage on his terms, from his own personal strength and field of interest. However, the narration subtly signals a paradox: "he attempts to sketch the dome and a portion of the façade, but the building's grace eludes him" (85). Yet, Gogol decides to pursue architecture (116). Through his work, which combines artistry with science and pragmatism, Gogol might have created his own compensatory path. The metaphorical possibilities are rich: architects build. They draw from tradition to make something new and useful. As it turns out, however, his freedom is limited. He had wanted to find a job "designing and renovating private residences" but instead joins a big firm where his "contributions are incidental, and never fully his own: a stairwell, a skylight, a corridor, an air-conditioning duct" (125).

Hence, the novel traces the possible avenues of compensation that Gogol refuses and the ones that he attempts without much success. While knowing Maxine and learning architecture enrich his life, they ultimately fail to provide him with an anchored sense of identity. Are we surprised that Gogol fails, since he does not know what he lacks, and hence, does not self-consciously know what he seeks? Lahiri's brilliant solution is that while the source of his name, Nikolai Gogol, and the reason for making Gogol a

namesake—his father's reading of Gogol's book saved Ashoke's life—are important, neither provides a simple anchor or easy eureka. It is the process of actively engaging with the Russian Gogol's writing and his father's love of it that lingers at the end of the novel:

> He leans back against the headboard, adjusting a pillow behind his back. In a few minutes he will go downstairs, join the party, his family. But for now his mother is distracted, laughing at a story a friend is telling her, unaware of her son's absence. For now, he starts to read. (291)

The final lines of *The Namesake* are characteristically mundane, momentous, and elliptical. Knowing the source of his name and acknowledging his father's gift does not magically transform Gogol from a hapless melancholic into a successful mourner. It is through reading that he will discover something he does not yet know. It is through reading that he will think, feel, consider, and reflect.

Lahiri's readers never learn Gogol's reaction to "The Overcoat." We never hear why Ashoke quotes Dostoyevsky to Gogol on the occasion of the latter's fourteenth birthday: "We all came out of Gogol's overcoat" (78). Similarly, we are never told why the Russians "will never fail you" (12). We do know, however, that reading "The Overcoat" literally saves Ashoke's life. Hence, at the level of plot, the Russians did not fail Ashoke, and Gogol was born after that experience and thus "came out" of "The Overcoat." At the level of literary history, we know that Gogol's 1842 short story inspired Dostoyevsky to turn away from imitating Balzac and Stendhal towards the cultivation of a distinctively Russian realism (Frank 117, 127). Some critics trace a line of influence from Nikolai Gogol to Dostoyevsky, Turgenev, and Tolstoy, considering him as "a father of the western short story, a precursor to modernism, and even a starting point for postmodernism" (Gwyon; Žekulin). And some believed indeed that these writers would not fail as guides to life, "lending the classic Russian novel near-biblical powers of moral edification" (Freeborn 25). Yet, "The Overcoat" provides no clear edification or path to salvation. Like *The Namesake*, it, too, features a protagonist named strangely and with a patrilineal connection. Like Gogol Ganguli who designs "incidental" air-conditioning ducts, Akaki Akakievich works as an "insignificant" document copier (Lahiri 125; Žekulin 337). Also like Lahiri's novel, Gogol's story is about loss at a basic level: Akakievich loses his overcoat to a robber. Does Akakievich's coping

method provide a model for Gogol Ganguli? The copyist appeals unsuccessfully to St. Petersburg authorities, dies a few days later, and then appears to haunt the city as a ghost who steals overcoats. Criticism on this story fills volumes in Russian and English. There is no consensus on the interpretation of this story, much less on any moral edification it might provide. Instead, the story provokes mystery and inspires further thought, and if on nothing else, critics agree that the story is important not only for *what* it says but also for *how* it says, and what it does not say. Herein lies one possibility for why classic Russian writers of the nineteenth century will never fail you: they never fail to inspire thought about the significance of an individual among vast forces, and they never fail to demand our attention as careful readers of form as well as content.

Reading itself, then, is a means of both communicating and compensating for loss, not only via the literal content of the work being read but also because of its value—idiosyncratically conceived and developed over generations in Gogol's family's case. As we read about Gogol Ganguli beginning to read, we realize that we are just finishing Lahiri's novel. What inheritances have we left unread? What ellipses have we left unconsidered? What have we read, and what will we read and reread? As Gogol becomes inspired to recover his inheritance—something that he did not know he had lost because he had not known that it was his to claim—perhaps Lahiri's novel can help the American literary tradition to move from its focus on immigrant loss to the compensation and recovery of its inheritance of global literatures—whether British, Bengali, or Russian.

## NOTES

1. Coincidentally, our term, "inheritance of loss," inspired by our readings of Lahiri, Eng, and Han, is also Kiran Desai's novel's title. See also Cheng, upon whom Eng and Han build.

2. Eng and Han list "homeland, family, language, identity, property, [and] status in the community" (352). See also Lowe, chapter 1.

3. For similarities and differences between Freud and Adler, see N. Ghosh and Steele 226. On Freud's break with Adler, see Hoffman, chapter 5. For an overview of Adler's life and work, see Orgler.

4. Mosak distinguishes between compensatory activities "within the area" and "in another area" (83).

5. Here, we are reminded that when barred from American cultural citizenship, some Asian Americans have fortified their sense of self worth by investing in other kinds of belonging, be it to an ethnic subgroup, a political solidarity, or a class consciousness, for example. Wicklund and

Gollwitzer note that their ideas about "symbolic self-completion" are underpinned by "the psychology of compensation" as theorized by Adler and others (208–226).

6. Gogol is the name the protagonist is initially given and which his parents use. He rejects his public name Nikhil in school only to readopt it in college. For readability, we refer to him as Gogol. Lahiri doesn't dwell on the daughter Sonia's strategies of compensation, though she does better than Gogol. Perhaps, her parents have learned from their "mistakes" with Gogol's naming and given her only one name: Sonali, which transforms into the cosmopolitan and relatively common Sonia.

7. Both Waldman and Sarvate make more nuanced observations, but these statements represent the poles of a debate, especially at public discussions of Lahiri's work in New England.

8. See Heinze for a related analysis. Peterson, too, insists on the need to read Erdrich's *Tracks* as both universal and political.

9. We note that while mothers often identify with Ashima in this scene, motherhood is not universal. Certainly, many women choose not to be mothers or are prevented from becoming mothers.

10. Agarwal provides this meaning in her review. A character in the film *The Namesake* adds that Ashima can mean "limitless."

11. See the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965. The main laws that prevented immigration from India were the Barred Zone Act of 1917 and the National Origins Act of 1924.

12. See Okihiro, Chan, Jensen, and Leonard.

13. Professional immigrants after the immigration reform act of 1965 have succeeded the most in terms of economic status, which may be stratified by education, social class, region of residence, and historical period of immigration. See Helweg and Helweg.

14. Reading in this way is not unlike Roland Barthes's idea of moving from work (i.e., the book itself) to text (i.e., the reader's interpretation of the work): "the Text is experienced only in an activity of production" (157). On the other hand, trauma theorists like Cathy Caruth remind us that not all ellipses can be filled; some mark unspeakable loss.

15. "Home" is a vexed concept for immigrants, visitors to lands of heritage, and minority populations. See especially sociologist Yen Le Espiritu's work on "home-making," defined as "the process by which diverse subjects imagine and make themselves at home in various locations" (2).

16. According to Bhabataran Datta, "a surname indicates, sometimes the caste or position or place of residence, sometimes a title conferred on account of the versatility in the sastras, sometimes a title conferred by the Muslim rulers" (54). He also lists Ganguli (55, 57) as a Brahmana surname from the Middle period, that is, 1200–1850 A.D., thus putting into doubt Ashoke's contention that his name was changed by the British (38). Datta explains that "words like Upadhyaya, Svamin, Acarya, etc. are added to the *gani* [village name] in order to give them a Sanskritized form. Thus we get Gosvami, Cattopadhyaya, Bandopadhyaya [ . . . ]. The Anglicised forms like Caterji, Banerji, Mukherji seem to be in use" (155). Furthermore, "the upper classes, better say, the cultured, are rather reluctant to change the forms of the surnames whereas the uncultured are not. Anglification renders many Bengali names such peculiar pronunciations and, in some cases, orthography that sometimes they become unintelligible even to the bearers of the same" (155).

17. Other Indian last names also signify occupation and caste: "Chamaria" or Chamaar is one who works or deals in leather (usually lower caste). This is similar to English names such as "Baker" whose profession was to bake, but while this loss may be similar in form it is certainly different in history and perhaps motivation.

18. In Mira Nair's film *The Namesake*, Gogol is older and explicitly names the mailbox desecration as the act of "racist punks."

19. Lahiri's evoking the trope of contamination by foreigners recalls the late-nineteenth century history of Asian Americans being considered the "yellow peril" in mainstream American media. See

Shah, for instance.

20. For example, according to a member of the 2004 Association for Asian American Studies Conference plenary planning subcommittee, some scholars explicitly did not want to invite Lahiri as a speaker because they considered her "apolitical."

21. Vincent Chin, the Chinese American engineer in Detroit, was beaten to death with baseball bats by two out-of-work autoworkers who blamed the Japanese for their economic state. See Christine Choy's documentary *Who Killed Vincent Chin* and chapter 4 of Sheng-mei Ma's *The Deathly Embrace*, "Vincent Chin and Baseball: Law, Racial Violence, and Masculinity."

22. This gendered transmission may also explain why Sonia seems to make her way through America with relatively greater ease and less burden than Gogol.

23. According to Martin, the "Communist Party of India following the Moscow line" had existed since 1920, but had success only in Kerala, and not in Bengal until the 1960s (116).

24. According to Chakraborty, even though India and Russia are geographically close, until the end of British rule, Indians received incomplete and "conflicting" information about Russia. Hence, "The first Indian students of Russian literature consisted of terrorists, nihilists, pacifists and vegetarians, and more recently communists—people who were only distant admirers of Russia and Russian literature" (298).

25. Although the train wreck may have been caused by terrorism, we are not told the cause or whether it was determinable. Train wrecks are relatively common: "Indian Railways runs almost 14,000 trains carrying more than 13 million passengers a day, but has about 300 accidents every year. Transport experts say that an increase in traffic and lack of modernization have made the rail system vulnerable, but authorities say the accident rate has dropped to 0.57 per one million km travelled in 1996/97 from 5.5 in the early 1960s" ("Train").

26. See Caesar and Song for the allegorical significances of Gogol's girlfriends.

27. For an ethnographic analysis of second-generation identity-formation during college, see Gupta and Sinha. For a recent sociological study, see Purkayastha.

28. This is ironic since the Taj Mahal was built by the Mughals, the Muslim rulers of India.

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## *Chapter 3*

# What Lies Beneath

## *Lahiri's Brand of Desirable Difference in* *Unaccustomed Earth*

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Reading Jhumpa Lahiri reinforces one's belief in a universal humanism where the differences among peoples is not so vast as to be unbridgeable and the distinctiveness of diverse perspectives not so irreconcilable as to create unpleasant hostilities. Lahiri's fiction adds a welcome frisson to encounters with unfamiliar Others who in their difference are not too disorienting and in their strangeness not altogether unknowable. Her works enable white and other non-South Asian American readers to confer on themselves the self-congratulations of a multicultural and cosmopolitan sensibility. Lahiri's readers can boast that they are not adherents of a "solitarist" worldview (as Amartya Sen would say); instead, they can take pride in their awareness that selves are multiply constructed and diversely performative. In this chapter, I focus on Lahiri's second collection of short fiction and illuminate how the stories in *Unaccustomed Earth* (2008) offer a comforting version of "difference" within the twenty-first-century cultural politics of the United States. I read the fictive landscape she constructs, with its delectable blend of ethnicity and degrees of westernization, both to acknowledge its allure and to disrupt an easy absorption of it. Through this critique of an easy engagement with Lahiri, I seek to illuminate the necessary self-interrogations and accommodations that must occur for a meaningful and enriching cohabitation of diverse peoples.

At the outset, let me say that this chapter does not seek to diminish the value of Lahiri's fictional territory—the well-to-do Hindu Bengali

immigrant community and its second-generation offspring in the United States. She knows this community intimately, and she recreates it in her writings with nuance, texture, and understated sensibility. That her work brings pleasure to many is undeniable. In 2007, her novel *The Namesake* was the choice of the "Seattle Reads" program where the residents of the city are all encouraged to read the same book and then discuss it in small groups. To facilitate this shared experience, the Seattle Public Library prepares reading guides, offers film screenings and panel discussions, and hosts the author whose work has been chosen. Lahiri's two collections of short stories are embraced by numerous reading groups, and there are reading guides available online to stimulate discussions. I, too, derive pleasure from her writing, absorbing through its restrained prose the layered emotional tapestry of her characters' lives. This chapter, then, is not intended to devalue her work; rather, its purpose is to encourage her readers to interrogate their own reading practices so that they may arrive at a heightened awareness of *how* they consume fiction.

The speaker in Eric Chock's poem "Strawberries" pleads to be allowed simply to enjoy his strawberries, to savor their juicy sweetness and not worry about which underpaid undocumented worker picked them, or whether the strawberry plants were sprayed with some carcinogenic pesticide, or how much fuel is used to keep running the farms in which the strawberries grow. He does not wish to have his pleasure in the strawberries tainted with considerations of the unpleasant realities that surround the cultivation of the delectable fruit. Chock's ironic strategy is to exhort us to care about these political realities and not simply to dwell in the pleasure of ingestion. My hope is that this chapter will move us readers and educators to seek the reasons for our eager embrace of and depth of investment in the savoring of Lahiri's writing. Floyd Cheung and Lavina Dhingra, in their chapter on Lahiri's *Namesake* (in this volume), argue that the ellipses in the novel (the moments when the narrative intimates something beyond the words on the page but does not supply the details of what is withheld) are invitations to readers to probe deeper into the text to excavate the hidden histories underlying that instance. The novel is about reading, they argue, and it is only when the protagonist Gogol bothers to pick up for the first time the book that his father had given him years before on Gogol's fourteenth birthday that he understands the significance of the textual

bequest that his father was attempting to pass on to him. Reading closely and reading to fill the ellipses are crucial to enriching the encounter with Lahiri, they attest. In a not dissimilar vein, I argue that reading Lahiri requires not just attentiveness to the ellipses but also awareness of the omissions—the things that do not find a place in her fiction—and to ask whether and to what extent these omissions complicate our pleasure in her work.

I engage Lahiri in this interrogative fashion against the backdrop of the work of Evelyn Alsultany and Mitra Rastegar. They have argued that the United States' deployment of veiled Muslim women as spokespersons to signal the nation's democratic openness to all forms of faith and to the individual's freedom to express religiosity (in contrast to France) in reality serves the state's underlying agenda of co-opting religious difference to enhance American individualism and thereby render Islamic difference comfortably familiar. Alsultany's and Rastegar's criticisms of the exploitation of covered Muslim women in the service of United States exceptionalism reveal the mechanisms by which the state appropriates difference to enhance the national agenda. The covered women who speak for the state department are enlisted to provide evidence of the acceptable Islamic female Other, and their presence serves to enrich the vibrancy of the multicultural American landscape. Lahiri's collection *Unaccustomed Earth* might be seen as serving a similar function—as evidence of the capacity of the American socio-cultural milieu to absorb the acceptably unfamiliar Other. The question I take up in this chapter is whether the multicultural ethos of Lahiri's stories ultimately injects a bracing brew into the U.S. cultural milieu and deepens the nation's engagement with differences of ethnicity, religion, and race, or whether her writing in *Unaccustomed Earth* simply invites a superficial approach to multiculturalism American style—where we congratulate ourselves for shifting from the metaphor of the melting pot to that of the salad bowl or mosaic.

Writing about Lahiri's first collection of stories, *Interpreter of Maladies*, Lavina Dhingra Shankar argues that the author "enlists identification (and either regret or self-exoneration) among (Caucasian or other non-South Asian) readers who might have indulged in a [ . . . ] rejection of the barbaric Other" (40). In a similar vein, Jessica Winegar, discussing the recent interest in the United States in exhibitions of Middle Eastern art, observes

that these exhibitions “enable their audiences to feel self-satisfied that they can appreciate the arts of a much-maligned region. Indeed, both organizers and audiences may perform their elite status through these events, and construct elite identities alternative to those of conservative elites who, it is presumed, could not appreciate art from the Middle East” (678). Consuming difference, then, enhances one’s sense of possessing global cultural capital and allows one to bask in the pleasure of being a person of sophisticated humanistic understanding. However, both Dhingra Shankar and Winegar exhort us to probe the fare that we are expected to ingest. Dhingra Shankar’s analysis of Lahiri’s presentation reveals the narrowness of Lahiri’s conception of the South Asian American Other. The characters she creates are “not too spicy,” and the narratives through which she presents their adjustments to the U.S. social and cultural landscapes are sufficiently de-historicized as to omit the many unjust institutional challenges (of immigration laws and other state-sanctioned discriminations) they confront. De-historicized and de-politicized art is also the material with which curators stage their art exhibits. “The bridges of understanding narrative . . . use[-] the aesthetic to anesthetize the complex history of interaction between the so-called East and West and especially any negative aspects of that interaction (for example, . . . the Crusades or colonialism),” notes Winegar (663). She explains that curators look for Middle Eastern art that emphasizes “past Islamic achievements [so as to set Islam at a comfortable temporal distance], benign religiosity, and critique of contemporary Islam. . . . Through the selection of certain kinds of cultural production from the Middle East, and by the process of naming these good art, certain Middle Easterners are allowed into the fold of humankind, but, importantly, others are not” (671). Most noticeable is the reluctance to exhibit Palestinian art, particularly that which draws attention to the suffering endured by the Palestinian people under Israeli occupation. “[E]vent organizers do not seek out artistic uses of religion to advocate for freedom from things like military occupation” (667), Winegar observes. Artistic productions of all kinds, when they feature minority Others, are expected to conform to certain tacit codes; they must be decorous and gently titillating, not confrontational and militant.

## THE PURITAN CONNECTION

The epigraph to *Unaccustomed Earth* comes from Nathaniel Hawthorne's introduction, "The Custom-House," to his novel *The Scarlet Letter*. This invocation of one of the United States' preeminent literary figures is not unlike the gesture that another Indian American writer, Bharati Mukherjee, employs in her novel *The Holder of the World*, where she announces boldly (through her narrator) that her protagonist Hannah Easton might have been the model for Hawthorne's protagonist Hester Prynne. Both Lahiri and Mukherjee insert themselves confidently into the literary lineage of the United States by inextricably linking themselves to Hawthorne, himself a descendant of the first Puritan settlers.

Mukherjee draws a direct link between herself and Hawthorne by positioning her protagonist as the source for Hawthorne's scarlet-letter-wearing Prynne. Hannah is a woman unconventional enough to journey to India in the seventeenth century and take an Indian King as her lover. Mukherjee's declaration of her link with Hawthorne comes at the end of her novel and is, if you will, the novel's last word, the final thought the reader is expected to carry away. It is also important to note that Mukherjee establishes her connection to Hawthorne through the figure of Hester Prynne, the outcast, the marginal member of the community who resolutely endures her isolation and is strengthened in the process. Through her, the community comes to interrogate its assumptions and appreciate the integrity of Hester's life decisions. Mukherjee appears to be saying that she (and perhaps other writers of South Asian origin) can add great value to the American landscape; their status as outsiders on the periphery of the core community gives them a unique vantage point and strengthens their resolve, attributes that will enrich the fabric of American culture.

Lahiri's turning to Hawthorne serves a similar aim. Her invocation of his sensibility grants credibility to her Bengali characters as being quintessentially American. Though they have multiple influences of heritage and history, tradition and custom, they are not all that "different" or unusual, she seems to be saying; rather, like the narrator of Hawthorne's "The Custom- House," they value displacement and seek unaccustomed earth. Lahiri's reference to Hawthorne is presented as the epigraph to the collection. Though an epigraph generally functions in expected ways to

“elucidate and explain” the title of the work and to provide a heuristic framework in which the reader can absorb the literary text, it also serves a less direct function, as Gerard Genette explains: its importance lies less in what it communicates than in whose utterance it is and therefore what kind of respectability and cachet the epigraphed (the writer who is referenced, in this instance, Hawthorne) confers on the epigrapher (the writer doing the referencing—in this case, Lahiri). Genette elaborates: “The epigraph in itself is a signal (intended as a *sign)* of culture, a password of intellectuality. While the author awaits hypothetical newspaper reviews, literary prizes, and other official recognitions, the epigraph is already, a bit, his consecration. With it, he chooses his peers, and thus his place in the pantheon” (160). The fact that Lahiri uses Hawthorne’s words as her epigraph indicates both her desire to be seen as writing fully within the American literary tradition and her confidence in positioning herself within the American literary pantheon. She already occupies a respected place in the U.S. literary landscape, having won the Pulitzer in 2000 for her first collection, enjoying robust sales for the novel *The Namesake* and an enthusiastic reception for its film version, and having the satisfaction of knowing that many of the stories in the second collection have appeared already as entries in *The New Yorker*. Thus when she positions Hawthorne’s words as the opener to her second collection, she does so with the full knowledge that she can legitimately claim her place within an established pantheon. Lahiri draws the reader’s attention not to the celebrated personage of Hawthorne’s oeuvre but to Hawthorne himself (through the semi-autobiographical narrator of “The Custom-House”—see especially, Pease, in this regard) and his articulated desire for the benefits of “unaccustomed earth.”

The actual text of the epigraph is thus as significant as the author who first crafted the words, particularly in helping us understand the brand of difference Lahiri offers her readers. The introduction to Hawthorne’s *The Scarlet Letter* signals the narrator’s dissatisfaction with fixity of location and refusal to be content with firmly anchoring oneself in the place of one’s ancestors. Hawthorne’s narrator observes, and these are the lines that form the epigraph of Lahiri’s collection, “Human nature will not flourish, any more than a potato, if it be planted and replanted, for too long a series of generations, in the same worn-out soil. My children have had other

birthplaces, and so far as their fortunes may be within my control, shall strike their roots into unaccustomed earth" (Hawthorne 11). Too long an embedded-ness in one place and a multigenerational fixed-ness in the same location are imaginatively depleting; to be replenished, one must move away; to be enriched, one must uproot oneself and seek new places, new environments, and new encounters. "I am a citizen of elsewhere," Hawthorne's narrator asserts, privileging a sensibility that actively eschews familiarity and seeks out the unknown.

But difference is a relative notion: how different and different from what? There is the difference between Catholic and Protestant, the difference between Baptist and Methodist, between Unitarian and Evangelical. These are differences of a different order than, say, the difference between Christianity and Buddhism. One might characterize the first type of difference as one of degree and the second as one of kind/substance. The difference Hawthorne articulates in his introduction is that between the literary milieu of nineteenth-century Concord, Massachusetts, and the mercantile imperatives of Salem, Massachusetts; to him this difference constitutes a major chasm to cross. His narrator is determined not to replicate the "oysterlike tenacity with which an old settler, over whom his third century is creeping, clings to the spot where his successive generations have been imbedded" (11). The narrator, a native of Salem (like Hawthorne himself) sees clearly that he has a choice to make: "I felt it almost as a destiny to make Salem my home; so that the mould of features and cast of character which had all along been familiar here . . . might still in my little day be seen and recognized in the old town. Nevertheless, this very sentiment is evidence that the connection, which has become an unhealthy one, should at last be severed" (11). But the rootedness that Hawthorne's narrator is determined to avoid and the different or unaccustomed earth he is moved to explore can hardly be construed as analogous to the forces that extricate individuals and groups from one location and cast them in unimaginably unaccustomed ground.

## DESIRABLE DIFFERENCE

Yet, Lahiri's invocation of Hawthorne is not entirely inapt. The unaccustomed earth that her Indian American characters thrive in is not so

unaccustomed after all, being more akin to the difference between Concord and Salem than that between West Bengal and New England. Granted, the immigrant generation—the parents of the protagonists in this second collection—have struggled to throw down roots in this unaccustomed earth. Their offspring, however, can complacently reap the benefits of their parents' accommodations; they have become accustomed to the cultural landscape. On the infrequent occasions that they are reminded of or become aware of their difference, they hold within themselves the apprehensions and anxieties that emerge, and quickly do whatever it takes to dispel them. For the most part, however, they are firmly grounded in the cultural milieu of their parents' adopted country. The shoots they and their parents cast out are gently different, alerting the residents that there is a pleasant newness among them, a novel feature to liven the landscape without demanding much adjustment on the part of those already living there.

Ambreen Hai's chapter in this collection offers a different perspective. She avers that Lahiri's characters in *Unaccustomed Earth* struggle to negotiate the "competing demands" of their "natal" (birth) family and their "alternatal" (newly constructed through chosen relationships) family (182). Their difficulty lies in their being unable to achieve a healthy balance between attachment to these two types of family, knowing when to give their energies to each and bringing the two families into productive contact and enriching interaction with one another. Though I resist Hai's contention that the second-generation characters are angst-ridden in their negotiation between "natal" and "alternatal" families, I concur with Hai that these difficulties remain in the realm of the private, within the unit of the family, within the domestic space. Hai accurately observes, "Lahiri's stories do not carry a radical or transformative political edge, [ . . . ] They remain limited to a heteronormative model of sexual familial formation—there are no same-sex couples here, or single parents, or other non-traditional forms of familial organization" (206). Lahiri's stories are comfortable for all kinds of readers because they "speak both for and to immigrants new and old, fostering empathy in [ . . . ] readers for (some kinds of) difference under the guise of sameness [ . . . ]."

In a different context, Evelyn Alsultany speaks of the "restrictive representations of diversity" (596) that were articulated and promulgated in the post 9/11 historical moment, particularly around Muslim American

identity. She notes that although the U.S. government ran a campaign to deconstruct the binary between “citizen” and “terrorist,” the manner in which it did so was insufficiently attentive to visible markers of difference and therefore inadequate in its encouragement of dominant-culture citizens to examine their own limited capacity to embrace the unfamiliar. The public service ads emphasizing diversity as fundamental to the American landscape reinforced a notion of difference that was comfortable, innocuous, and therefore easy to embrace. “Arabs, Muslims, and Sikhs are not specifically included in this diverse display. There are no visible markers of anything Arab, Muslim, or Sikh in the ads—no veil, no mosque, no turban, no beard; no distinctive Arab, Muslim, or Sikh clothing; and no Arab accent” (597). Even in those ads where there are visible markers of difference, as in the ads displayed by the Council on American Islamic Relations (CAIR), they are mitigated by other markers of “model citizenship” narrowly defined (performances of the “perfect lives” that those who are visibly different are expected to lead). The Arab American Muslim woman who chooses to cover compensates for her visible religiosity by being educated and highly accomplished: “I’ve earned a Master’s degree from Georgetown University, and I’ve won several national speaking awards. I’m a development researcher for an international corporation. I vote. I’m active in politics, and I belong to several civic organizations” (606). These manifestations of “good Muslim” citizenship (conjuring up the unfavorable image of the “bad” Muslim who lurks near by and setting up the good Muslim–bad Muslim dichotomy that Mahmood Mamdani critiques) reduce representations of diversity to a register of difference on display (akin to the catwalk of ethnic difference), where those who vary in appearance from the visible norm are expected to adhere scrupulously to behavioral norms, with no room for lapses.

Lahiri’s characters are the equivalent of “good” Muslims. They are resolutely middle class, even upper middle class. They are all professionals —academics, lawyers, doctors, photographers, medical journalists. They drive Audis and visit art museums. The immigrant generation’s departure from India is prompted not by economic necessity but by a desire (an “extravagant” desire as opposed to “necessity,” as Sau-ling C. Wong posits) to expand educational opportunity or pursue increasingly challenging, and therefore fulfilling, employment. One does not find in her stories any

working class Indian Americans—no gas station attendants, no taxicab drivers, no pizza delivery boys, no convenience store cashiers, no newspaper vendors, and no motel receptionists. Her Indian Americans listen to Chopin's *Nocturnes* and buy their groceries in gourmet food stores. Furthermore, Lahiri writes of a very small sliver of the Indian American community—offering not just a glimpse of upper class Indian American life, but the lives of the Bengali Hindu community. She trains her craft and our attention onto this small cross-section of Indian American life, and though she constructs her characters and her narratives with exemplary sensitivity and complexity, one should not forget that what we get is a microscopic and homogeneous view of an incredibly heterogeneous Indian American population. There are no Muslims, Sikhs, and Christians among her Indian Americans. In drawing attention to the upper-class and religious homogeneity of Lahiri's Indian immigrant and Indian American landscape, I am not suggesting that she is obliged to portray the heterogeneity of the Indian community in the United States. There is no prescription I assert for the kind of characters she should create. In fact, one could argue that by limiting her fictional purview to what she knows best Lahiri is exercising laudable restraint and avoiding irresponsible forays into imagining the experiences of socioeconomically challenged and Muslim and Christian Indian immigrants and their offspring. Bharati Mukherjee, by comparison, has been frequently criticized for her ventures into describing the "unfamiliar" experiences of a wide array of Indian and other Asian characters (Srikanth 184–186), and her attempts at such renditions have been deemed artificial and not credible, and the extraordinarily complex life narratives and displacements of her characters overly sensationalized and dramatic in their shock value. Lahiri's characters are seen as impeccably authentic and perfectly believable and drawn from circumstances with which she is entirely familiar.

That Lahiri's characters are easy to absorb is not surprising. They allow the non-Indian reader to encounter Indian-ness as though it were not significantly different from what is familiar. Her immigrant Indians and their offspring conform to the model of successful citizenship that is comfortable and easily embraced by the majority group. These are ornamental Indians, their presence adding color and variety to the American ethnic landscape. Any awkwardness of appearance or behavior is located in

the immigrant generation, who, for the most part, form the backdrop in this collection of stories (with the exception of the title story). The parents in "Only Goodness" recall us to the foreignness of being immigrants: "In Wayland they became passive, wary, the rituals of small-town New England . . . confounding . . . They relied on their children, on Sudha especially. It was she who had to explain to her father that he had to gather up the leaves in bags, not just drag them with his rake to the woods opposite the house" (138). When these parents invoke their difference to account for a crisis in which their son Rahul finds himself (he has been pulled over and placed in jail for under-age drinking and driving to endanger), they are represented as ignorant and ill-informed, unwilling to examine their own limitations in their haste to blame America:

> "It's ridiculous," her mother said . . . She blamed the police for overreacting. "It's not like he had an accident. He was only going forty miles an hour. They probably stopped him just for being Indian." . . .
>
> "That wasn't the problem," Sudha said slowly. . . . "I think Rahul might have a drinking problem."
>
> "Sudha, please," her mother said. After a pause she added, "I gather everyone at American colleges drinks." She spoke as if drinking were an undergraduate hobby, a phase one outgrew. . . .
>
> Sudha pitied her mother, pitied her refusal to accommodate such an unpleasant and alien fact, her need to blame America and its laws instead of her son. (142–43)

By contrast, the children of these immigrants—whether born in the United States or arriving here when they are young—find their place with relative ease in this unaccustomed earth, quickly blending in and navigating the new landscape without too much fuss. Any difficulty they might encounter as a result of their difference from the majority culture does not leave a permanent scar; these young Indian Americans are capable and confident. Through the presentation of these successful Indian Americans and their offspring, not only are non-Indian and non-South Asian American readers softened to accept them in their small differences, but also the openness of the United States as a country that enables the success of outsiders is underscored and implicitly celebrated. The material success of the lives of the Indian American community is evidence of the welcoming embrace of the United States.

Lahiri's Indian Americans, simply by focusing their energies on economically getting ahead and accumulating the appurtenances of success, underscore the opportunities provided by the American landscape and

reassure readers of the endless possibilities of the United States. If some of her characters do not reach their full potential, it is implied that it is not the American system that is to blame. It is their own lack of investment in their professional ascent (Amit's dropping out of medical school, for example). The focus is resolutely on the individual—on agency, choice, analytical action—not on the systems and institutions that might affect the outcomes of one's choices and actions.

Mitra Rastegar explains how the United States' attractiveness as a tolerant and pluralistic nation is reflected through the marked bodies (the covered or veiled heads) of its Muslim American women. That women *choose* to cover and so observe their individual religiosity is used as proof that in the United States a truer and freer Islam can thrive, one that locates religiosity as a personal and individual choice, rather than as a response to a communal dictate. But these ostensibly personal choices are, she argues, coerced by the relentless influence of elaborate political structures. Like Alsultany, Rastegar too observes that in fostering a certain kind of visible religious performance, the U.S. nation state communicates the codes of behavior that are acceptable and that American Muslims should adopt. The subtle message is that there is an American Muslim faith that is different from the Islam "out there," and this is what American Islam should look like:

> Contrary to many sociological conceptions of the United States as a secular state that is neutral and non-interfering with regard to religion, there is emerging evidence that the state is seeking to constitute religious identities tied to patriotic citizenship, promote particular religious meanings and foster an 'American Islam' in the service of the U.S.-led 'war on terror.' . . . [T]he United States presents itself as a place of tolerance where 'true' Islam can thrive. However, in producing this image and implicitly promoting specific religious positions, the United States proves itself to be invested in constituting an "American Islam" in opposition to other "enemy" versions of Islam. In this process, those who do not abide by a state-supported definition of Islam are constructed as anti-modern, un-American, and potentially dangerous. (456)

## PRIVATIZED FEELING, POLITICS HELD AT BAY

The political sphere—issues of power, privilege, and rights—are completely absent from the pages of Lahiri's writing. Though in the style of her writing, in her attention to the subtleties of the private space (the family and its social connections), Lahiri can be compared to Jane Austen, her similarity to Jane Austen (whose complex understanding of human nature and tight focus on a small cross-section of society she shares) ends here.

Austen's novels are keenly alive to disparities of social class and ironic in their presentation of the ways in which women are forced to commodify themselves to be selected as life partners. Austen takes on other volatile issues of her time. In *Mansfield Park*, she engages slavery, bringing discussion of it into the home as an evil that must be confronted and reckoned with, argues Michael Karounos.

By contrast, Lahiri's deeply probing presentations of human character never stray into difficult ideological issues. Even in her closing story, "Going Ashore," where she pulls back her lens to include many different regions of the globe (Latin America and Ramallah, for example), she does so through the character of her protagonist photographer, Kaushik, and his restless spirit that absorbs but does not engage the messy politics of these regions, preferring simply to document what happens through his pictures. His photographs, which provide evidence of gross human rights abuses, are his one connection to humanity and the contoured lives of the others with whom he shares the globe. Kaushik knows that "in his own way, with his camera, he was dependent on the material world, stealing from it, hoarding it, unwilling to let it go" (309). And it is through his photographs that he is able to have any connection with his aging father, living in Massachusetts: "Kaushik continued to wash up on his father's doorstep, in the form of his photo credit in one of the newsmagazines his father read, announcing that he was alive, indicating where he'd been and what he'd seen" (306). Even his untimely death is "announced" by the absence of recently posted photographs from his website. Politics is aestheticized and made distant, reduced to photographic evidence, in this story.[1] It is Lahiri's way of gesturing to a world out there awash with complicated struggles but one that she is unwilling to let into her delicately constructed domain of personal relationships.

That she and her writing have won some of the most prestigious awards, including the Pulitzer and the Guggenheim, can be understood in part by turning to the popularity of a rather different book, Khaled Hosseini's *The Kite Runner*. In his analysis of the thousands of Amazon customer reviews of this novel, Timothy Aubry explains one reviewer's satisfaction with it:

> Her experience enables a sense of her own subjectivity as globally mobile or infinitely capacious, and thus, despite the text's 'strangeness' and 'unfamiliarity,' she identifies with the story, feeling as if she embodies humanity in all its heterogeneous manifestations. While scholars . . . argue that

> sympathy as a basis for politics tends to be either too provincial or too homogenizing, the sympathy articulated by reviewers of *The Kite Runner* often synthesizes a sense of sameness and a sense of otherness, exemplifying a fertile tension, which mediates both their perceptions of the represented foreign characters and, at least in the moment of their reading, their perceptions of themselves. (2009, 28)

Herein lies the key to Lahiri's success with a different kind of reader—not one who seeks the pleasures of a blatantly universalist pull within a recognizably foreign setting, but the sophisticated reader who seeks the nuanced and oblique appeal to her capacity to meet subtle "difference" and foreignness. Aubry makes a compelling argument that *The Kite Runner* succeeds precisely because its particularity and specificity gives teeth to a universalizing humanity, enabling readers to feel fulfilled in their sense of themselves as being able to cross large cultural divides and connect to the stranger. He writes, "Identification with Amir's accessible foreignness thus serves to substantiate an otherwise pallidly theoretical understanding of universality, lending it an immediate defamiliarizing embodiment, while simultaneously allowing readers to make a personal claim on the pain and tragedy that they associate with Afghanistan for a therapeutic process of self-dramatization and self-forgiveness" (2009, 32). Aubry extends his argument to note that because as a nation we are divided in our view of the ethics of our military intervention in Afghanistan, *The Kite Runner* allows us the opportunity both to connect to the country and its people in a humanistic (apolitical) fashion and to reinforce our sense of ourselves as large hearted enough to bridge difference. I would add that it is precisely because Afghanistan is so geographically removed from the United States that it is easy for us to make the wide cultural crossing and ignite our common humanity. Compassion and empathy for the stranger in our midst is much less forthcoming, because we would then be required to make significant accommodations in our day-to-day lives. Lahiri succeeds because the stranger she creates is in reality no stranger. Her Indian American characters don a veneer of difference, a thin surface that is only skin deep.

Her Indian American characters wear their ethnicity lightly, even playfully. Let's take the story "Nobody's Business." Two of its protagonists are Sangeeta and Faroukh, the former an Indian American woman, and the latter her Egyptian lover, who is an academic. Sangeeta introduces herself

as and goes by “Sang.” Faroukh prefers to be called “Freddy.” When she teases him for wanting to be called Freddy, he says somewhat irritatedly, ‘“Why not? You expect people to call you Sang.’” She responds, ‘“That’s different. That’s actually a part of my name’” (185). The ease with which Sangeeta can become Sang, without structurally having to alter her name, parallels the ease with which Lahiri’s characters slip into mainstream American culture. She and Faroukh listen to Chopin’s *Nocturnes* when they spend time together in her room. Her Indian-ness manifests itself minimally, in the batik bedspread that adorns her bed and in the “two framed Indian miniatures of palace scenes, men smoking hookahs and reclining on cushions, bare-bellied women dancing in a ring” (192) that hang on the wall. These items add to her allure, gesturing to an exotic heritage that is available to her, a world from which she emerges to tantalize her male housemate Paul, who is smitten with her.

The story unfolds through Paul’s perspective. Sang both fulfills and flouts his expectations of what an Indian American woman should be. For instance, she receives phone calls from potential suitors who are all eager to connect with her and who have tracked her down through various Indian connections. (This intriguing bit of partner-seeking animates most Indian American narratives, which can never seem to shake free from the theme of marriage, and, more to the point, arranged marriage.) Sang, however, is not flattered by these attentions, and she expresses her annoyance at being pursued and at the aunts and other relatives who direct these men to her. In an ironic reversal of attitudes, it is Sang’s non-Indian female housemate Heather who reminds Sang of the usefulness of these prearranged connections and their value in making one feel desired: “‘God, Sang, I can’t believe you’re complaining. Dozens of men, successful men, possibly even handsome, want to marry you sight unseen. And you expect us to feel sorry for you?’” (175). The hitherto problematic Indian custom of arranged marriage, wherein the woman is seen to have no agency in the choice of her mate, is here transformed into the fully American custom of a woman being pursued by several male suitors. Sang is the object of her housemates’ envy precisely because she is so desired.

In almost all the stories in the collection, the heterosexual liaisons and marriages are cross cultural and cross racial—one of the partners is an Indian American Bengali Hindu, and the other an American of European

descent. These relationships are by and large successful, and in the one instance where the marital harmony is broken (in the story “Only Goodness”) the damage results not from any ethnic or cultural dissonance but from the alcoholism of the Indian American wife’s (Sudha’s) brother who, while babysitting his biracial nephew (Sudha’s husband is an Englishman), almost drowns the infant in his state of drunkenness. The story ends with Sudha’s “thinking of the husband who no longer trusted her, of the son whose cry now interrupted her, of the fledgling family that had cracked open that morning, as typical and as terrifying as any other” (173). She blames herself, in part, for her brother’s alcoholism, remembering that it was she who introduced him to alcohol when he came to visit her at Penn when he was a junior in high school. Note that even in this moment of bleakness, the narrator emphasizes the “sameness” of her despair and possible future calamitous life—her fledgling family is now “as typical and as terrifying as any other.” This crack in the once perfect egg of her life does not set her apart or distance her from the mainstream; it folds her into the familiar by removing her from the artificiality of the success of the Bengali community in which she was raised.

This “cracking” of Sudha’s family calls to mind the metaphoric explosion that bares the inside of the privileged home in which Adrienne Rich grew up as a child. The relationship between Sudha’s experience and that of Rich is, however, one of antithesis. Rich underwent a significant transition as a poet, from being the “faithful drudging child” (23) who wins prizes to becoming “the woman with a mission, not to win prizes/but to change the laws of history” (23). Her self-conscious decision to shed the safety and much-lauded efforts of her earlier poetic productions (she won the Yale Younger Poets award for her first collection of poetry and was praised for being a good disciple by W. H. Auden) and write a poetry that tore the veil off people’s eyes meant the abandonment of all that she had grown up with, the influences of her childhood and young adulthood. She asks, “And if my look becomes the bomb that rips/the family home apart/is this betrayal” (16). “[M]ore and more I see like this everywhere” (16), Rich writes, declaring that it is impossible for her to dwell in the perspective of her younger days, where she lived life in a cocoon of privilege. Her newly adopted vision bursts open the walls of comfortable homes and exposes the residents inside to the reality of the lives they have chosen to ignore—the

segregated and discriminatory milieu in which they have thrived. Rich's poem records the moment of "explosion" as her awakening to the realities of her privilege and the corresponding degradation of others' lives. Politics enters her hitherto protected home, and it is the politics of the world outside. In Sudha's case, her world cracks open to reveal not the turbulence outside to which she must necessarily attend but the damage within to which she must now turn further inward to fix. This resolute interiority of vision, which examines life within the safe boundaries of a particular kind of privileged experience, constitutes, I would argue, a central attraction of Lahiri's work to her wide audience.

Timothy Aubry's characterization of the politics of interiority in "middlebrow fiction" further illuminates the particular appeal of Lahiri's work. I am not by any means suggesting that Lahiri's work is middlebrow (in the sense of this word's connotation of an easy-to-access literary aesthetic); however, Aubry's description of the attributes of this genre of writing applies readily to Lahiri's works: "the subjective perspective of particular characters assumes paramount importance, and individual psychology represents the object of interest, the site of complexity and depth, the ontological center of the fictional world" (85). Middlebrow fiction is "therapeutically focused on personal or domestic struggles to the exclusion of social or political issues" (86), Aubry notes, where "the therapeutic world-view espouses a particular brand of liberal individualism that seeks value, meaning, and fulfillment within the personal or domestic, as opposed to the public or political, sphere" (86). Focusing on Anita Shreve's immensely popular 1998 novel *The Pilot's Wife*, Aubry offers a persuasive reading of the privileging of the domestic space in contemporary American fiction. The attention to this space, the energy invested in preserving the American way of life despite the rude intrusions of the world outside (Shreve's female protagonist's airline pilot husband is found to be an Irish Republican Army abettor) is itself a deeply political act. Aubry accurately observes, "*The Pilot's Wife* appears to offer a salutary reminder that the measures members of the middle class take to protect the domestic sphere from the intrusions of the outside world and the dangers of politics are themselves completely political in character" (101). Shreve engages the political world outside the home, but ultimately enshrines the home as the space that must be protected from the intrusions of the turbulence outside.[2]

The threats in Lahiri's collection, however, are not political (and by politics I mean the "messy" questions associated with the distribution of power and resources among different groups of people). Hers are the threats of illness and the natural world, safely outside the realm of politics.[3] Kaushik's death is the result of a natural disaster. He is in Thailand in December 2004, and he is killed by the tsunami that devastates that part of the world. The catastrophes that occur are not caused by human error or malice (at least there is no hint of any malign motivation). The two maternal figures who die fall victim to things beyond the control of humans. In the title story, Ruma's mother goes in for a routine gallstone surgery and dies, having "reacted adversely to the Rocuronium used to relax her muscles for the procedure" (20). In Part 2 of the collection, Kaushik's mother dies of breast cancer. Again, it is no one's fault, no mishap that could have been averted, no behavior that should have been changed. The United States is seen, in fact, as a refuge from the depressingly prying attention of relatives in India. When Kaushik and his parents return from a sojourn in India so that his mother can spend the last days of her life in the Boston area, it is, Kaushik explains, "not so much for treatment as it was to be left alone. In India people knew she was dying, and . . . inevitably, friends and family would have gathered at her side . . . trying to shield her from something she could not escape" (251). It is in the Atlantic Ocean that her ashes are finally scattered, indicating that she has chosen the United States over India as the place for her soul. The immigrants and the second-generation Indian Americans both embrace the United States, and the United States also appears to embrace them unproblematically. There is no criticism by the newcomers and their offspring of the "unaccustomed earth" in which they have made their home.

## PALATABLE STRANGERS AND THE CURIOUS CASE OF FREDDY/FAROUKH

Derrida's reflections on democracy and the openness to different Others provides a valuable framework within which to probe Lahiri's brand of difference and understand its allure and its limitations. He notes: "Thinking takes place not on what we can do, but beginning with what we cannot do. And a democracy in which one thinks everything possible and that

democracy exists is already gone. . . . [D]emocracy, for me, is the political experience of the impossible, the political experience of opening up to the other as possibility of impossibility. The event only happens under the aegis of the impossible" (194). This then is the challenge that is missing from Lahiri's writings—"the political experience of the impossible." The different Others (second generation Indian Americans) who form the core of her work are not "impossible" (read unassimilable or unrelatable) beings who make it difficult for European American and non-South Asian readers to open up to. We see no confrontations in her narratives between "impossible" Others and the majority population, no demand that the members of this latter group fundamentally consider doing what they cannot imagine doing.[4]

Sucheta Mazumdar, Vijay Prashad, and Rosemary George, among others, have written about the racism of South Asian American immigrants and their quick adoption of anti-Black discourse to distance themselves from a group they see as obviously disenfranchised and removed from the corridors of power. None of this problematic discourse finds its way into Lahiri's narratives; in fact, there are no African American characters in her fictive world, even in peripheral roles. There is, however, one character of Arabic descent, and Lahiri's treatment of him is curious and troubling. I would argue that she uses him to strengthen the links between Indian Americans and white Americans. His character becomes the instrument through which the Indian American female gets a necessary education in reality and the white American male is enabled to play the role of rescuer.

The character in question is Faroukh or Freddy in the story "Nobody's Business." He is Egyptian, he is wealthy, and he teaches Middle Eastern history at Harvard. Sangeeta, or Sang, is devoted to him, doing his shopping, proofing his articles, scheduling his doctor's appointments, and running all kinds of errands for him. We learn of their relationship through Paul, the male housemate who shares an apartment with Sangeeta, and who, it is obvious, is preoccupied with and in love with her. Gradually, it becomes obvious to Paul and to the reader that Faroukh exploits and disrespects Sangeeta, although she herself is unaware of it or won't acknowledge it. One day, Paul hears Sangeeta, when he walks past the closed door of her room, accusing Faroukh: "Why didn't he ever want to meet her friends? Why didn't he invite her to his cousin's house for

Thanksgiving? Why didn't he like to spend the night together? Why, at the very least, didn't he drive her home?" (189). It is clear that Sangeeta is hopelessly dependent on Faroukh, despite his controlling manner with her. He tells her she smells bad and asks her to wash under her arms. Through the months of Faroukh and Sangeeta's tumultuous relationship, Paul is deeply concerned, and wishes he could intervene. He is studying to retake his PhD qualifying exams, having failed them once. Lahiri depicts him as well-intentioned but ineffectual, weak, and initially unable to act.

However, in the course of the story, Paul acquires the resolve to intervene. The narrative has a triple trajectory—the disclosure of Faroukh's deception and the incontrovertible proof of his contemptible exploitation of two women—Sang and Deirdre, a white woman; Sangeeta's gradual realization of the fool she has been and her awakening to the realities of Faroukh's despicable character; and Paul's growing agency as the rescuer who makes it possible for Sang to learn the truth about Faroukh. When Paul finally confronts Faroukh, he challenges him to verbalize his deception to Sangeeta. In the physical altercation that ensues, Paul and Faroukh injure one another, Sangeeta "[gets] down on all fours and crawled into Faroukh's coat closet, weeping uncontrollably" (216), the police arrive and restore order, asking Paul to take Sangeeta home. Shortly after that, Paul passes his qualifying exams with flying colors. "Saving" Sangeeta from Faroukh affirms his self-confidence and allows him to meet the academic challenge that he has previously been unable to overcome. In the contest between the Arab and White male, it is the latter who emerges with his dignity intact.

In the process, we get an example of what Gayatri Spivak ironically describes is the justification colonialism/imperialism offers for its intrusions into countries in the Middle East and Asia. The Europeans convince themselves that their presence liberates the oppressed women of these nations: "White men are saving brown women from brown men" (296). The narrative that has repeatedly provided the justification for the West's intervention in the affairs of the Middle East and Asia is once again played out in this story.[5] That Lahiri should resort to a pre-scripted narrative is surprising, but more surprising is that she should use the character of Faroukh as the site of Paul's and Sangeeta's maturing. Faroukh is the only male in the entire collection who is unredeemable in his unattractiveness. And he is the only Arab male in the collection. In a post-9/11 world, the

choice of an Egyptian as the one character who abuses (psychologically, if not physically) women cannot be innocent. Ambreen Hai, in this collection, cautions readers against a too ready acceptance of Spivak's "easy aphorism" of white men saving brown women from brown men, by noting that what matters is that the brown woman is saved, and we shouldn't reject help simply because it comes from a white man. She is right that too often the "liberation" of the brown woman is read as an intrusive western narrative, and this intrusion becomes an excuse for the brown man, eager to maintain his independence from the forces of colonialism/imperialism, to persist in his exploitation and oppression of the brown woman. Easy consumption of any injunction is always to be resisted, but it is precisely this sentiment—of brown women needing to be liberated by forces of the West—that U.S. feminists reproduced and deployed (I use this word deliberately) when they lent their support to the invasion of Afghanistan following the attacks of September 11, 2001.[6]

Faroukh is outwardly suave—he is successful, sophisticated, westernized, cultured, and attractive. He is, therefore, an appealing package. Compared to him, Paul, the white male, is diffident, clumsy, and unsuccessful. And yet, Faroukh's trappings of success ultimately work against him and serve to demonize him further by underscoring the full extent of his deceit. By contrast, Paul is revealed to be the genuine article, the assiduously persevering underdog who eventually emerges triumphant. Thus, the jetsetting Egyptian male emerges as hollow, untrustworthy, and unworthy. Ultimately, the most he can do is resort to uncouth, uncivilized behavior by spitting in Paul's face.

The unpalatability of Faroukh—the only such unattractive character in the entire collection—leads one to the not unreasonable conclusion that Lahiri has allowed herself to be taken in by the rhetoric of the abusive Arab male in circulation in post-9/11 United States. But Lahiri is too skilled a writer to make the mistake of giving us a crude representation of such a figure. Faroukh uses his persona to beguile and seduce Sangeeta and Deirdre; in their trusting innocence and neediness, they succumb to his false charm and then find themselves unable to extricate themselves from its allure. Had Lahiri been a writer of little artistic talent, had her prose lacked the polish for which it is rightly celebrated, it would not have mattered so much that she gives us a character like Faroukh and through him transmits rather

stereotypical and reductive ideas about Arab men. The danger lies precisely in Lahiri's superior craft; not only does Faroukh package himself attractively, but also Lahiri wraps him in her artfully constructed narrative and weaves him into her rich tapestry. We too are seduced by her story and caught up in its allure. One might even forget that Faroukh is Faroukh; after all, he insists on introducing himself as Freddy. So, Lahiri, it would appear, presents Freddy/Faroukh as a cautionary tale.

Perhaps it is unfair to focus on one story in the entire collection and mine it for its problematic representation of the Arab male. However, I do so not to undermine Lahiri's craft. Rather, in calling attention to the omissions in her writing (of politics, power, class, diversity of religion, issues of race) and the use of Freddy/Faroukh as the one unpalatable stranger in a large cast of Others, I wish to caution readers against a too ready acceptance of her beautiful universe. The unaccustomed earth of the United States may present itself as a most welcoming home for peoples of all kinds. It is easy to fall under the spell of Lahiri's promise of such an outcome. But as Derrida would caution, it is imperative to be cognizant of the gap between "democracy to come and the limited present of democratic reality" (195).

## NOTES

1. See especially Walter Benjamin, Susan Sontag, and Zahid Chaudhary, "Phantasmagoric Aesthetics": "photographs are symptomatic of . . . the 'phantasmagoric aesthetic.' It is a way of managing the very structure of vision and visibility to re/produce the modern form of alienation . . . This includes an alienation from one's own social and physical embodiment that becomes the ground from which otherwise invisible violence, toward others as well as oneself, may be witnessed with comparative ease" (71).

2. Timothy Aubry's discussion of Anita Shreve's novel *The Pilot's Wife* presents an alternate relationship between the interiority of the psychological novel and the domestic space, on the one hand, and the intrusion of the dangerous political external world, on the other. Aubry observes, "instead of retreating from politics, *The Pilot's Wife* works actively to politicize the domestic sphere in a systematic fashion, cataloguing the ways in which the husband's secret affiliation with the Irish Republican Army has shaped the family's protagonist's family dynamics" (87).

3. Illness and the natural world are not inherently apolitical, but Lahiri's engagement with them is. Illness can be rendered political if presented within the context of health disparities and differential medical care. And natural disasters, when considered against economically driven decisions affecting our use of and engagement with the natural world, become heavily politicized (as in the explanations for the colossal damages resulting from Hurricane Katrina).

4. Simon Hay's trenchant criticism of Azar Nafisi's *Reading Lolita in Teheran* is especially relevant, in this regard. He contends, "Nafisi's book draws our attention to this segment of Iranian women—educated, wealthy, with links to the West . . .—who thereby come to stand in for Iranian

women in total, or at least become those for whom our sympathy is demanded" (15). Also, "Rather than encouraging an engaged understanding of the complex of different and often competing social, religious, and political practices that are so commonly reified in Western coverage as 'Islam,' the book encourages sympathy *at the individual level* with these women while insistently asserting the superiority of Western culture" (16). See also Bahramitash.

5. See Lila Abu-Lughod, "Do Muslim Women Really Need Saving?" Also, Leila Ahmed "Discourse of the Veil."

6. See Lila Abu-Lughod, "Do Muslim Women Really Need Saving?"

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*Part Two*

# Consuming Diaspora: Audience and Imaginary/Intimate Communities

## *Chapter 4*

# Novel/Cinema/Photo

## *Intertextual Readings of* The Namesake

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In March 2007, Fox Searchlight Pictures released Mira Nair's film *The Namesake*. Based on the 2003 novel by Jhumpa Lahiri, *The Namesake* foregrounds the generational difference between the American-born Gogol Ganguli and his parents Ashima and Ashoke, both immigrants from India. That same week Sepia Gallery, a private gallery in Manhattan, premiered *Namesake: Inspiration*, an exhibition of photographs that inspired Nair's making of the film. Promoting the film, the exhibition, as well as the novel, Nair and Lahiri made a number of joint public appearances and interviews. In New York City, the burst of publicity accompanying these events made the experiences of middle-class Indian immigrants immediately visible on screen, on the page, and in the gallery setting. No longer were Indian immigrants, as Lahiri protested in an interview, absent from books and other forms of public culture. Rather, Lahiri's novel itself has become a classic text of immigration, and Nair's film among the most widely distributed visual representations of South Asians in the United States. The photography exhibition that accompanied Nair's film amplified the specific history of middle-class Indian immigrants, but its diverse selection of images underscored how immigration is also perceived as a universal experience, common to all Americans.

In this chapter, I foreground the intertextual relationship between the literary, cinematic, and photographic versions of *The Namesake* in order to examine how this text circulates in U.S. public culture as an "ethnic" story

that engenders "universal" narratives of belonging to America. *The Namesake* spans over three decades, tracking the Ganguli family's migration from Calcutta to Boston. At the crux of the novel is the generational encounter between Ashoke Ganguli and his son, Gogol. While Gogol chafes against his peculiar name—a name that he feels is redolent of his father's history in India, not his own life in America—I demonstrate how the story of Gogol's namesake generates a transnational story of belonging. Drawing upon Gayatri Spivak's notion of "catachresis," I argue that "Gogol" is a metaphor for the ways in which the novel unevenly binds together the disparate histories of postcolonial India and contemporary America.

As a film, *The Namesake* generates a cinematographic representation of India and the United States—and of Indians *in* the United States—that is distinct from the novel. If the novel suggests that Indian immigrants are postcolonial subjects, bound by histories of nationalism on the subcontinent, the film emphasizes the ways in which South Asians are racialized and classed subjects in the United States. Reading Nair's adaptation requires attending to the cinematographic techniques and screenplay that distinguishes her iteration of *The Namesake* from Lahiri's novel. Because the film circulated as a dominant visual representation of South Asian immigration, it also requires being read in relation to major ethnographic studies of South Asian immigrants that have emerged over the past decade. Finally, the brief exhibition of photographs in *Namesake: Inspiration* displaces both the literary and cinematographic narratives of *The Namesake*. Though some images in the exhibition drew directly from the film, the majority of photographs had no relation to India or to the United States. The lack of geographical reference and historical narrative in the exhibition generated a quintessentially "American" story of immigration. Thus as *The Namesake* transformed from novel to film to exhibition, so too did its textual narrative transform from a postcolonial critique of Indian and U.S. nationhood, to a racialized portrayal of South Asians in America, and finally to photographs that capture a "universal" experience of migration.

Karen Cardozo has argued in this volume that the novel *The Namesake* is itself an intertextual narrative, for Lahiri's novel draws upon the short story "The Overcoat" by Nikolai Gogol. I build upon Cardozo's argument to

consider how *The Namesake* engenders other forms of intertextuality across a variety of media including cinema and photography. Reading the transmutation of the novel in each of these different genres alerts us to the necessity of developing an interdisciplinary framework of analysis, one that situates a literary reading of Lahiri's text alongside an ethnographic and spectator-based reading of the exhibition and the film. Bringing together these different modes of analysis opens out *The Namesake* beyond a singular focus on the novel's intergenerational narrative of migration, and toward a more capacious understanding of the transnational experiences of belonging that structure both the reader and viewer's engagement with the text. Whereas the novel sharply demarcates the historical and temporal distance between India and the United States (delineated through the first-generation immigrant experience of Ashoke Ganguli, and the second-generation experience of his son), the film binds together these two national spaces through establishing visual continuity between scenes shot in Calcutta and in New York City. Nair produces a sense of visual and spatial continuity in the film through her use of several cinematographic techniques: among them, substituting New York for Boston in the novel, as well as her consistent use of bleached bypass. Yet while the cinematic version of *The Namesake* ties together India and America seamlessly, Nair's representation of Indians in America elides class differences within South Asian immigrant communities. As I argue, Nair's *Namesake* celebrates the achievements of upper-middle-class and upwardly mobile South Asians, even as actual immigration from the subcontinent has resulted in increasingly large working-class South Asian communities. The dissonance between the cinematic representation of South Asian Americans in *The Namesake* and ethnographic evidence on the working-class composition of immigrant communities in New York highlights how middle-class narratives of South Asians continue to circulate in popular culture as a dominant representation of a heterogeneous immigrant community.

I conclude with a brief reading of *Namesake: Inspiration*, the photography exhibit that coincided with the film's premiere in New York City. Unlike the novel or the film, these photographs do not detail South Asian immigration to the United States, nor are they limited to images of India or America. Instead, the exhibit featured prominent photographers from Asia, Latin America, and Europe whose meditations on migration featured abstract

images of movement, such as airports, escalators, and suitcases. The geographical and temporal dissonance among the photographs curated for the show created a narrative distinct from the novel and the film. Whereas Lahiri's and Nair's versions of *The Namesake* foreground the experiences of Indian immigrants, the images that composed *Namesake: Inspiration* were unmarked by differences of race, class, and national origin. The dissolution of a specific immigrant experience from the photography exhibit, therefore, complicates Lahiri's assertion that South Asians are absent from public culture. Although Lahiri's own novel provides what she describes as an "affirmation" and "acknowledgement" of the journey that middle-class Indian immigrants made to the United States, the photography exhibit erases the history of South Asians in U.S. public culture. The journey that *The Namesake* makes across three distinct media delineates the ways in which this story of South Asian migration consistently negotiates national and ethnic categories of belonging, and critiques universal notions of citizenship.

## THE NOVEL: NAMING AND BELONGING TO AMERICA

In Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Namesake*, the protagonist Gogol Ganguli despairs over the circumstances of his unusual name. For Gogol's parents, Ashima and Ashoke, their son's name is an unexpected consequence of living in the United States. Though they expected Ashima's grandmother to choose a name for their child, her letter from Calcutta never arrives. Ashoke is left to record the name of his favorite writer, the Russian author Nikolai Gogol, on the official record of his son's birth. For the young Gogol, his name is a constant reminder of his parents' racial and historical difference: it represents their tastes, preferences, and customs, a way of being that marks how foreign they are in his world. Originally a "pet" name to be used in the privacy of family and other intimates, Gogol also comes to function as a "good" name in the public domain of school and work. As an adult, Gogol legally changes his name to Nikhil, but even this name falls short of establishing a new "American" identity. Nikhil proves to be an awkward fit for Gogol, for the men and women who come to know Gogol only as Nikhil have no idea of the histories that shape his family's life in United States. Given that Lahiri herself publishes under her pet name, Gogol's discomfort

with his namesake represents the ambivalence of immigrant identity.[1] As a pet-name-turned-good-name, “Gogol” is a metaphor for the ways in which the novel binds together personal and national history, private and public space, India and the United States.

*The Namesake* evokes the transnational subjectivity of South Asians in the United States by establishing an intertextual relationship between the novel and Nikolai Gogol’s short story, “The Overcoat.” As a latent and infrequent motif in *The Namesake*, “The Overcoat” circulates throughout the novel as an anachronistic historical referent. Certainly, Gogol Ganguli views this short story and its author as a relic of past time, an example of his father’s odd literary tastes. However, by foregrounding the ways in which Ashoke Ganguli identifies with “The Overcoat,” I demonstrate how notions of postcolonial subjectivity bind together first- and second-generation experiences of immigration to the United States.

Less than a decade before the birth of his son, a young Ashoke travels from Calcutta to rural Bengal to visit his grandfather. Ashoke’s blind grandfather has requested the company of his grandson to read him aloud the newspaper in the morning. The daily act of reading the newspaper incorporates Ashoke and his grandfather into the imagined community of the Indian state, participating in the project of postcolonial citizenship.[2] In addition to reading the newspaper, Ashoke’s grandfather has a second request: to read aloud Dostoyevsky and Tolstoy in the afternoon, not contemporary Bengali authors but the great Russian writers. At the end of this trip, Ashoke has also been promised an inheritance: the vast store of European and American novels that are housed in his grandfather’s bookcase. Ashoke boards the overnight train to his grandfather’s home engrossed in a collection of Nikolai Gogol’s short stories. His journey is soon interrupted by an accident: the train derails, and Ashoke is left for dead under a pile of corpses. In his hand he clutches a single sheet from “The Overcoat.” Fluttering in the wind, the piece of paper enables Ashoke’s rescue, his recuperation in Calcutta, and his eventual departure to the United States. At the time of Gogol’s birth, Ashoke remembers the story that saved his life, and names his son after its author.

First published in 1842, “The Overcoat” is the story of Akaky Akakyevich, whom Nikolai Gogol describes as “a Civil Servant who cannot by any stretch of the imagination be described as in any way remarkable”

(5). In fact Akaky's name is the most unremarkable thing about him, for it is a repetition of his father's name and thus carries with it the burden of genealogy without any distinctive identity. The theme of repetition and reproduction is extended throughout the short story: Akaky is employed as a civil servant in St. Petersburg, and his only responsibility is to copy government documents. The act of duplication is his single greatest source of pleasure; even when his superiors request him to change words in a particular text, Akaky cannot bear to do so. Indeed, it seem as if "his very lack of identity is the source of his happiness" (Caesar, "Gogol's Namesake" 104). However, this lack of identity changes when Akaky decides to buy a new overcoat. As he scrimps and saves toward this goal, the thought of owning a new overcoat fills Akaky with a sudden and overwhelming desire: "His whole existence [ . . . ] somehow [seemed] to have become fuller, as though he had got married, as though there was someone at his side, as though he was never alone" (*Overcoat* 28). Yet Akaky's personal transformation is short-lived. On the first night he wears his new overcoat, he is accosted by thieves and robbed of his coat. Akaky complains to various members of the imperial bureaucracy, but he is left powerless by their brutality. Consumed by fright and anxiety, he dies shortly thereafter. For many weeks following his death, the ghost of Akaky is rumored to haunt St. Petersburg, stripping citizens of overcoats in all shapes and sizes.

What makes "The Overcoat" so compelling to Ashoke Ganguli, who is drawn to the story of a man who occupies another place in another time? In contrast, what does Gogol Ganguli's abhorrent reaction toward the short story and its author tell us about his desire to establish a singular notion of selfhood, distinct from his father? In her chapter "Gogol's Namesake," Judith Caesar writes that, "One can read the story as a kind of parable about identity theft and shifting identities, in which Akaky goes from being no-one, to being an overcoat, to being a ghost, and finally to being, perhaps, a version of the very person who robbed him [ . . . ] The true protection seems to lie in not being known, not being knowable" (105). Expanding upon this reading of shifting identities, I focus on the spatial and temporal relationships established between "The Overcoat" and Ashoke Ganguli, and between Ashoke and his son. The relationships between these fictional

characters in nineteenth-century Europe and twentieth-century America illustrate the historical production of transnational subjectivities.

Although the young Ashoke has never been outside of India, much less anywhere outside of Bengal, he identifies strongly with this nineteenth-century short story set in St. Petersburg. Akaky's government job reflects the mundane clerical occupation of Ashoke's own father; his mouth waters at the prospect of the celebratory meal that Akaky eats the night he wears his new overcoat, despite the fact that Ashoke has never tasted such food in his life. Though Akaky's life acquires absurd and tragic proportions, what draws Ashoke to this fictional protagonist is his desire to inhabit alternate identities. Like Akaky, who one day gives up his anonymous existence for a beautiful overcoat, Ashoke also occupies multiple identities. He nurtures an academic interest in engineering and a passionate love of literature; he is a dutiful son to his parents but also yearns to move away from home; later in life he is both Bengali and American, and known by both his good name as well as his pet name, Mithu. For Ashoke, Akaky's desire to inhabit a new overcoat mirrors his own desire to become someone else.

In his translator's note to the 1956 edition of the short story, David Magarshack writes that Nikolai Gogol emphasizes "the inalienable right of every human being to freedom and happiness" (*Overcoat* 63). In the aftermath of the train wreck it is this pursuit of happiness—a sentiment legally enshrined in the U.S. Declaration of Independence—that motivates Ashoke to migrate overseas. When he is immobilized at home for a year to recover from his injuries, Ashoke uncharacteristically abandons Nikolai Gogol's stories, and focuses instead on his study of engineering. Ultimately, it is his engineering degree that gains him, along with so many other South Asian immigrants in the mid-1960s, admission to the United States. Many years later Ashoke recalls "The Overcoat," and he thanks its author not only for saving his life but also for the gift of beginning a new life through his son.

In contrast to his father's veneration of Nikolai Gogol, Gogol Ganguli hates his namesake. Throughout his awkward teenage years, Gogol feels that his given name is symptomatic of his discomfort between worlds. It is not simply the fact that his full name is neither Russian, nor Indian, nor American; instead, what is most disturbing is the fact that his name collapses the distinction between public and private lives. With a "good"

name supplementing his pet name, Lahiri writes that Gogol "could have had an alternative identity, a B-side to the self" (76). But for Gogol, there is no other identity that provides refuge, no distinction between an intimate interior life and the public persona he exhibits at school and work. As a teenager Gogol is unaware of the circumstances of his father's accident, and the first time Gogol confronts his namesake is in a high school English class. Here Gogol learns of the circumstances of Nikolai Gogol's life and death: the writer, afflicted with depression, reputedly died of self-imposed starvation as a means of purging himself of homosexual desire.[3] Hearing his teacher read these details aloud in the classroom, Gogol feels betrayed; without an alternate name to shelter him, he feels that his own life (his small circle of friends, his inexperience with women) is exposed to public view. Whereas the short story enables Ashoke to fictively inhabit multiple identities, for his son the Russian writer limits his own growth. So crowded is his given name with various narratives of the past that there is hardly any room for Gogol himself.

The fact that Gogol shares his first name with the writer means that his name is never uniquely his own: it contains histories preceding his birth, histories that link Gogol to his parents' lives in India. The word "namesake" is variously defined as, "A person or thing that has the same name as another"[4]; "that shares the same name as someone or something else previously mentioned"; "named after or for."[5] As Nikolai Gogol's namesake, Gogol Ganguli mirrors Akaky Akakyevich, a man who assumes that his life can only function as a duplicate or copy, a reproduction rather than the original. These biographical parallels to Nikolai Gogol's fictional character prompt Gogol to mistakenly conflate the temporal and spatial distinction between himself and his namesake. Because he is named after the writer, Gogol assumes that his name is already crowded with the history of "someone or something else." Throughout his adolescence Gogol struggles with the burden of distinguishing his experience from the experience of his namesake. In the process he denies not only his relationship to the Russian writer's homosexuality and depression, but also to the time of his father's life in India.

In *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason*, Gayatri Spivak argues for the reintroduction of the word "catachresis," which she defines as a "false but useful analogy" (179). Discussing the term in relation to J.M. Coetzee's

novel *Foe*, Spivak describes the pedagogical process through which Friday, the African "native informant" in the novel (who is tongue-less, and therefore speechless), is taught the word "Africa." She writes, "*Africa* is only a time bound naming; like all proper names it is a mark with an arbitrary connection to its referent, a catachresis" (189). Confronted with the word "Africa," Friday denies its pedagogical repetition, choosing instead to write the four letters "h-o-u-s." Whether finally "hous" comes to stand in for "house" and is made synonymous to "Africa" remains unclear in the narrative of *Foe*.

Like the name "Gogol" which has only an arbitrary link to its literary and historical referent (the author Nikolai Gogol and Ashoke's train accident), Gogol Ganguli's relationship to his namesake is defined as a time bound naming. It is of course literally bound by space and time, a pet name to be used only in domestic circumstances. The problem with this proper name is that it exceeds its bounded confines, slipping into the realm of the "good name." When as an adult Gogol confronts the history of his namesake, he decides to write back another word, this time the proper name "Nikhil."

Officially changing his name to Nikhil at age eighteen, Gogol aims to mark an entirely new temporality from the history of his namesake. Yet in exercising his legal right, Gogol joins the ranks of the thousands of men and women who have changed their names in America. As Lahiri writes in *The Namesake*, Gogol's decision to change his name is far from ordinary, for "European immigrants had their names changed at Ellis Island, [and] slaves renamed themselves once they were emancipated" (97). Though Nikhil is ostensibly a self-chosen name, it was the original "good name" that Ashoke and Ashima selected for their son, which Gogol rejected as a child. Even in the act of changing his name Gogol unwittingly echoes his namesake, who shortened his surname from Gogol-Yanovsky at the start of his writing career. As Gogol learns by reading an issue of *Reader's Digest*, changing one's name is "a right belonging to every American citizen" (99). His legal change of name is thus not only a personal rite of passage; it is also emblematic of consenting to the rights and constraints of American citizenship.

And yet "Nikhil" also functions as a catachresis, a useful (but ultimately false) analogy. Unlike the name Gogol, which was bound to the past, Nikhil is bereft of a sense of historicity altogether. Describing the aftermath of his

name change when Gogol begins his freshman year at Yale, Lahiri writes, “There is only one complication: he doesn’t feel like Nikhil. Not yet. Part of the problem is that the people who now 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” (105). Nevertheless, it is as Nikhil that Gogol engages in a series of romantic relationships and establishes his professional career. These accomplishments are tempered by his increasing realization that a name change alone cannot alter the historical past, for even as Nikhil his first name continues to reference the author Nikolai. As Spivak comments, “All longings to the contrary, it [the proper name] cannot provide the absolute guarantee of identity” (*Critique* 188).

Gogol’s incomplete transition from pet name to good name reflects the temporal disjuncture between identity and citizenship that structures the immigrant narrative of *The Namesake*. The disparity between naming and belonging, however, is also mapped through Gogol’s spatial relationship to the United States. Unlike Ashoke, who imaginatively located himself in another place and time via the act of reading, Gogol insists on identifying only with America. At the same time, he is constantly reminded of his limited claims to this land. Although Gogol was born and raised in New England, he is prevented from claiming that terrain as his birthright. For example, as a child on a school field trip he cannot find his family name on the tombstones at a local cemetery. He brings home an illustration of someone else’s tomb, a drawing that his mother immediately discards. As an adult Gogol trains to become an architect, aspiring to create new ways of inhabiting physical space. It is in this professional capacity that he begins a romance with Maxine Ratliff, whose wealthy New England parentage provides her with a right to property that Gogol cannot imagine. Indeed, despite his efforts to assimilate into Maxine’s landscape, Gogol is insistently reminded of his racial difference.

As a child, Gogol’s spatial environment is defined by his parents’ aspirations for middle-class success: a home in a safe neighborhood, a good education for their children. The Ganguli home in suburban Massachusetts builds upon these ideals of prosperity and security: its quarter-acre of land in the front yard, the thick carpeting, the velvet-upholstered chairs in the formal dining room, a newly installed alarm system. However, the mere ownership of property is insufficient compensation for their distance from

India, and so to feel at home Gogol's parents routinely fill their house with fellow Bengalis over the weekend. Though they own a house in Massachusetts, their life is underlined by a sense of contingency that comes with knowing that their "real" home is elsewhere. Even at home, Lahiri underscores that the Ganguli family will always be immigrants, always foreign to the land that they inhabit.

In contrast, the Ratliff family confidently lays claim to their properties in New York City and New Hampshire. Their genealogical right to the land is reflected in their conviction that their lifestyle need not change to accommodate others. Their summer home faces mountains and a wide lake; it is rooted in the place where generations of Maxine's family have been buried. As Gogol remarks, "The family seems to possess every piece of the landscape, not only the house itself but every tree and blade of grass [ . . . ] The Ratliffs own the moon that floats over the lake, and the sun and the clouds" (155). Sequestered within this idyllic rural terrain, Maxine and her family inhabit an America untransformed by the desires of new immigrants. The vast spaces the Ratliffs own offer the luxury of privacy, and in contrast the Gangulis' need for physical proximity to other Bengalis appears stifling to Gogol. However, Gogol is also reminded of the fact that it is his presence in the Ratliffs' world that is contingent, and their experience that is universalized. Apart from their obvious affluence, the Ratliffs inhabit their property as if it were an extension of their body. This form of ownership is not only a matter of a legal right to property; it is also about inhabiting a naturalized relationship to the United States that Gogol and his parents, as racialized immigrants, cannot claim.

Toward the end of the novel, as Gogol reflects on his ambivalent relationship to his name, his parents, and their homeland, he notes that:

> He had spent years maintaining distance from his origins; his parents, in bridging that distance as best as they could. And yet [ . . . ] he has always hovered close to this quiet, ordinary town [ . . . ] for most of his adult life he has never been more than a four-hour train ride away. (281)

Despite Gogol's desire to create a life distinct from his parents, he has always stayed close to home. It is his parents who have left behind their homes and families in India, and it is they who have given up the intimacy of their pet name to be known in the United States only by their good name. After the death of his father and pending departure of his mother to India, Gogol recognizes that no one in the United States will call him by his pet

name. He will now always be known as Nikhil, the name that offers only a partial narrative of self. Without a name that explains his birth in America or the circumstances that persuaded his father to leave India, Gogol is unmoored from a sense of history. Reading "The Overcoat" provides one way for Gogol to link his immigrant identity to his father's claims to postcolonial subjectivity. Returning to the cold St. Petersburg winter that transformed Akaky Akakyevich, Gogol begins to reconcile, somewhat inconclusively, the distance between himself and his namesake, and between his life in America and his parents' memories of India.

Although *The Namesake* is conventionally read as a coming-of-age story, the intertextual relationship between the novel and "The Overcoat" engenders a different set of spatial and temporal relationships that bind postcolonial India with contemporary America. As I have argued, Ashoke's identification with Akaky Akakyevich engenders a notion of transnational time and space; in turn, naming his son after Nikolai Gogol ties the Ganguli family's experiences in America to their life in India. However, as an adult Gogol attempts to produce and inhabit a sense of locality that is distinct from his namesake. As Nikhil, Gogol desires a temporal and spatial claim to the land of his birth that establishes his right as a U.S. citizen. Yet it is also as Nikhil that he confronts his racial marginalization in the United States. At the conclusion of the novel, when Gogol rediscovers a copy of "The Overcoat," the short story sutures the temporal and spatial distance between India and the United States, between the past and the present, and between Gogol's racialized identity and the postcolonial subjectivity embodied by his father.

## THE FILM: A TALE OF TWO CITIES

Discussing the transformation of *The Namesake* from novel to film, Jhumpa Lahiri writes:

> People talk about immigrants as being displaced. I prefer the word 'transposed,' used in music to describe shifting to a different key. That is what happens when a person leaves one homeland for another, and that is what happened as *The Namesake* made its voyage from paper to film. Much like the characters I write about, the story, on-screen, both is and is not itself. Its essence remains, but it inhabits a different realm, and must [ . . . ] conform to a different set of rules. [ . . . ] Movies also occupy a much more public place than novels do. They are publicly created, publicly consumed ("Writing and Film" 8).

Released four years after the novel's publication, Mira Nair's cinematic adaptation of *The Namesake* was an intimate collaboration with Lahiri (who, along with her parents and daughter, stars in the film) and with Nair's longtime screenwriter, Sooni Taraporevala. In acquiring the rights to Lahiri's novel, Nair has spoken extensively about her personal investment in *The Namesake* as a tale of love and loss, and in particular how she envisioned the film as a love story between Ashima and Ashoke.[6] By foregrounding the first-generation immigrant experience of Ashima and Ashoke rather than the second-generation story of Gogol Ganguli, Nair was also able to reconfigure the spatial topography of the novel. Not only did Nair substitute New York City for Boston in the novel; more importantly, she established a visual continuity that bound together Calcutta with New York. Whereas the literary narrative of *The Namesake* is premised on the spatial distance between India and America, the cinematic adaptation of the novel emphasizes the continuity between these sites. Nair's ambition was to have New York and Calcutta mirror each other; in her words, to "shoot these two cities as if they were one" ("Photographs as Inspiration" 19). By "transposing" the novel to the film, to use Lahiri's words, Nair creates a visual representation of South Asian America. This imaginary homeland seamlessly intertwines two densely populated cities (Calcutta and New York); it also codifies an upwardly mobile narrative of immigration as the dominant experience of South Asians in the United States.

Nair uses several cinematic techniques to link New York with Calcutta throughout the film. First, medium-shots and still camera images of bridges are consistently used as transitions between countries as well as across time. Second, the camera's consistent focus on modes of transport, specifically trains, buses, planes, trams, and trolleys in both New York and Calcutta produces a sense of temporal and spatial contiguity between two urban sites. Third, Nair's use of bleached bypass on select scenes throughout the film link together Ashoke and Ashima's memories of home with their present experience in the United States. Instead of being captured through the sepia-tinted lens of nostalgia, Calcutta appears in the film in real time, as a cultural, political, and social space that is integral to the Gangulis's lives in America.

The consistent use of bridges as a visual metaphor in the film links together two distinct urban sites. The film opens with aerial shots of

Calcutta and a sweeping panorama of the Howrah Bridge, the sixth-largest bridge in the world. Crossing the Hooghly River, the Howrah Bridge is integral to transporting goods and peoples from one end of Bengal to another. The camera focuses on the young Ashima, who maneuvers the narrow staircases and pavements that run alongside the river. Born and raised in Calcutta, Ashima cannot imagine living elsewhere, but the consistent visual focus on the bridges behind her suggest that Calcutta, as a center of trade and transport, has always been linked to places beyond India. The bridges in this opening scene thus prefigure Ashima's migration to the United States for shortly thereafter Ashima is introduced to Ashoke and becomes his wife. While the imagined national spaces of India and the United States are linked through the Howrah Bridge, later in the film bridges also sever the ties between Indians in India from the lived experience of Indian immigrants in the United States. For example, soon after Ashima gives birth to Gogol, she gazes out onto the George Washington Bridge, which links New York City to New Jersey. The image of the George Washington Bridge fades into another shot of the Howrah Bridge, where in Calcutta Ashima's parents await the news of their first grandchild. The structural differences between the two bridges breaks the visual continuity within the scene, highlighting instead the spatial and temporal distance between Ashima and her parents. While Ashima sits alone in her sterile hospital room, her parents' home is bustling with activity; meanwhile, the George Washington bridge carries a steady stream of cars and train during the evening rush hour, while the cacophony of sounds on the Howrah Bridge (cars, bullock carts, and auto-rickshaws) announces it is morning in Calcutta.

Despite the obvious spatial and temporal breach between New York City and Calcutta, Nair continues to visually bind together both cities by focusing on modes of public transport common to both sites, including trains, planes, and automobiles. Intercutting between long shots of trolley tracks in Calcutta and subway rail lines in New York City, Nair depicts a world in motion. Yet the scale of the camera also makes clear how much has been lost through migration. By interspersing shots of the cavernous Howrah Railway Station alongside the more prosaic Metro-North train station near the Ganguli's home, the viewer recognizes how the scale of the Ganguli's own lives has become smaller even though Ashima and Ashoke

live in a large suburban home. Though Nair emphasizes that the Gangulis are mobile subjects (two major sequences are shot in U.S. airports, at least one scene takes place in an Indian Airlines plane, and several scenes are shot in Indian and U.S. train stations), the same lines of transport that keep the Ganguli family together are also what break it apart. This is prefigured early in the film, when on his way to his grandfather's house Ashoke's body is literally broken by warped railway lines and twisted metal carriages. That accident has a psychic afterlife later in *The Namesake*, for toward the conclusion of the film Gogol is also immobilized on a railway track. At a Metro-North station en route to his family home, Gogol learns that his wife Moushumi is involved with another man. In contrast to Ashoke, who was motivated to leave his parents in India after the train accident, Gogol returns to surburban New York in a state of shock after hearing of Moushumi's affair, as if he cannot conceive of being betrayed by his own family.

Nair's color composition of her frames is another visual device that links together the spatial topographies of Calcutta and New York City. Throughout the film, Ashima's home in India as well as her own creation of an "Indian" household in the United States is consistently depicted through densely saturated colors. Despite the worn façade of Ashima's family home in Calcutta, the saris hanging on its balcony, the vegetables sold to Ashima's mother, and the billboards that crowd the streets come to life on screen through a palette of reds, mustard yellows, greens, and blues. That same color palette informs many of the domestic scenes shot in the Ganguli's home in suburban New York: the living room is a vivid red, the backyard a verdant green. Though Ashima is never one to call attention to herself, her elaborately woven saris provide shots of color against the gray Northeast landscape.

Yet at key moments Nair also drains the scene of color through the use of bleached bypass, as if to sever the tenuous links that the Gangulis have retained with their families in Calcutta. Bleached bypass is a photographic technique that literally bleaches color out of the frame and renders the scene in shades of sepia, black, and gray, thereby showcasing the alienation that circumscribes Ashima and Ashoke's new life in America. Early in the film Ashima, Ashoke, Gogol, and the infant Sonia travel to Cape Cod, Massachusetts. Gogol and Ashoke make their way out to the sea, whereupon Ashoke encourages his young son to remember their time

together, on these rocks from which there is no place left to go. The entire scene of Ashoke and Gogol facing the Atlantic is bleached in foggy grays and blues, mirroring Ashima and Ashoke's literal location in a country from which there is nowhere left to go. The contrast between deep color and bleached bypass is also apparent in a later scene when Ashima learns of Ashoke's sudden death. Whereas the scene opens with Ashima resting comfortably on the deep red couch that anchors their living room, softly illuminated with the twinkling lights of a Christmas tree, when Ashima hears of Ashoke's heart attack over the telephone the house is immediately masked in tones of grey. In shock and panic Ashima runs through the darkened rooms of the house, smearing off her *sindoor*, taking off the bangles that signify her marital status. She runs out into the backyard, where at night the Gangulis's neighbors light up elaborate sculptures of reindeers. Yet in contrast with the Christmas tree in Ashima's living room, in this scene after her husband's death the lights are only visible through a haze of yellow, subdued by the darkened and empty streets that surround Ashima's solitary figure. Her loss is magnified through Nair's judicious use of bleached bypass, and it is especially telling that Ashima's face and clothing is only rendered in saturated color when she finally returns to Calcutta at the end of the film.

From Nair's perspective, making *The Namesake* was an opportunity to tie together her childhood memories of Calcutta with her current experience of New York, a city that has been her home for more than thirty years. Equally important, the movie enabled her to portray a different vision of South Asians in Manhattan, one far removed from working-class immigrant communities in Queens. In a companion publication to the film she writes,

> Jhumpa Lahiri's New York is not the immigrant communities of Little India or Jackson Heights but the New York of lofts, Ivy League bonding, art galleries, political marches, book openings, country weekends in Maine with WASPy friends, a deeply cosmopolitan place with its own images and manners. This was the place I had lived in since 1978; this is the city where I learned how to see. [ . . . ]
>
> New York was my looking glass and in making *The Namesake*, I could show the world the ease and confidence of the new South Asian cool in the city, how the desi demi-monde really lived here—a New York that rarely makes its way onto the screen. In her novel Jhumpa managed to tie this world seamlessly, and with incredible specificity and intimacy, to Calcutta. ("Photographs as Inspiration" 15).

It is striking that Nair claims that this upwardly-mobile version of New York is where she "learned how to see," for it shapes both the cinematography of *The Namesake* as well as how she perceives what it means to be South Asian in America. This notion of being South Asian in Nair's *Namesake* is centrally defined through class. For example, as an adult Gogol is a Yale-educated architect building a professional life in New York; he dates young women who are born into wealth (such as Maxine, whose parents own a large home in the Chelsea art district and a country house in Connecticut), and marries Moushumi, a woman whose affect (her clothes, mannerisms, and circle of friends) exudes what Nair describes as "ease and confidence." This class-bound New York is the site of what Nair calls "the new South Asian cool," but her version of the city marginalizes most of the South Asians who currently live there. Gogol and Moushumi's on-screen lives are entirely divorced from the large numbers of working-class Indian, Pakistani, and Bangladeshi immigrants who live across the city, even though it is the labor of this immigrant group that constitutes the cosmopolitan character of New York. Even though Nair herself has created films that foreground working-class South Asian immigration (most notably in her 1982 documentary, *So Far From India*), in *The Namesake* the camera's focus resolutely remains on the upwardly mobile lifestyles of middle-class South Asians.

Viewed from this perspective, Nair's *The Namesake* is at odds with several recent ethnographic studies of South Asian immigration to New York as well as other documentary films that profile immigrant communities. For example, in Vivek Bald's seminal 1994 documentary *Taxi-valah/Auto-biography*, Bald interviews Pakistani and Indian taxi drivers who earn their living by driving through the streets of New York. Unlike the depiction of roads, highways, and bridges in Nair's *The Namesake*, in Bald's documentary the roads of New York are treacherous, and the meager wages that the drivers make do not necessarily enable them to go home to the subcontinent. More recently in their 2004 documentary *Bangla East Side (B.E.S.)* Fariba Alam and Sarita Khurana demonstrate how working-class Bangladeshi immigrant youth remap the geography of downtown Manhattan, creating public spaces that link their memories of Dhaka with their everyday lives in New York City. Similarly in her book, *India Abroad*, the anthropologist Sandhya Shukla highlights how working- and lower

middle-class Indian, Pakistani, and Bangladeshi immigrants create “Little Indias” in New York City in precisely those neighborhoods that Nair eschews in her film. Neighborhoods like Jackson Heights in Queens are spaces of consumption that are central to what it means to be Indian, for as Shukla writes, “Indians meet there, eat there, and buy and sell there, and essentially perform an Indianness that functions to consolidate their multiple subjectivities” (84). Like other major commercial venues for Asian American immigrants across the United States (such as Koreatown in Los Angeles and Chinatown in New York and San Francisco), Jackson Heights is central to producing and embodying a sense of what it means to be Indian abroad. Recent ethnographies have also demonstrated the centrality of working-class organizations (including labor unions, youth groups, queer and women’s rights groups) to the notion of what it means to be South Asian in New York.[7] Such films and ethnographies demonstrate that a South Asian New York is not limited to the upwardly mobile middle-class that Nair romanticizes in her film, but instead is produced through the creative cultural productions of working-class immigrants across the city.

The dissolution of class difference from Nair’s depiction of a “new South Asian cool” is central to the mass appeal of *The Namesake*. Because the film deliberately evades contemporary histories of South Asian immigration and the racialization of South Asian immigrants (particularly post-9/11), its central narrative propagates the romantic possibility of upward class mobility as an experience common to all American immigrants. What makes the Ganguli family’s story recognizably “ethnic” in the film—that is, the difference of race—is also what enables the viewer to elide the difference of class. Nair’s celebration of a “desi [South Asian] demi-monde” enables her to showcase the transnational mobility of middle-class immigrants, a mobility that is heightened by her consistent emphasis on bridges and forms of public transport that visually link New York City to Calcutta. Yet while Nair succeeds in establishing a formal visual continuity between two very different urban sites, the cinematic version of *The Namesake* is unable to reconcile the difference between working-class and middle-class South Asian immigrants in New York City. In this context both Nair’s version of *The Namesake* and Lahiri’s novel foreground a middle-class history of South Asian migration at the expense of the heterogeneous class experiences that define South Asians in the United

States. How such a narrative of upwardly mobile Bengali immigrants circulates in public culture as a "universal" experience shared by all Americans is the central problematic of the exhibition, *Namesake: Inspiration*.

## THE PHOTOGRAPHS: REPRESENTING THE "ETHNIC" AND THE "UNIVERSAL"

At Sepia Gallery in downtown Manhattan, *Namesake: Inspiration* opened just three days after the release of Nair's film. Curated by Esa Epstein, head of Sepia International, the exhibition was sponsored by the Alkazi Collection, a major private collection of nineteenth-century South Asian photography. The exhibition, however, was not limited to contemporary or archival photographs from South Asia. Instead *Namesake: Inspiration* collated a total of forty-five photographs by thirteen photographers of several different nationalities, taken between 1931 and 2007. While some prints were in color, others were black and white; the images ranged in size from miniature to large-scale prints.[8] Interspersed among these images were stills from *The Namesake*, taken by Nair as well as by her director of photography, Fred Elmes. Although the exhibition was timed to coincide with the film's premiere in New York, the photographs that were compiled for the show produced a narrative independent of the novel and the film.

The curated works ranged far and wide, from an exquisite miniature accordion-fold book by the Indian photographer Dayanita Singh, composed of sixty gelatin silver prints from *The Namesake*'s shoot in Calcutta; to large-scale images of one of the world's longest bridges in Japan by Jun Shiraoka; to elegiac sepia-tinted prints made in the 1930s by the Mexican photographer Manuel Alvarez Bravo. While several prints by the acclaimed photographer Raghubir Singh drew upon his own long-term residence in Calcutta, many other images by prominent travel photographers such as Derry Moore and Adam Bartos had no fixed geographic location. The archival and digital photographs spanned landscape images taken in the 1950s with architectural photographs taken in the 1980s and 1990s. Unlike Lahiri's or Nair's versions of *The Namesake*, therefore, the exhibition did not limit its geographic purview to India and the United States, or its temporal narrative to the late twentieth century. More so than the Ganguli

family themselves, *Namesake: Inspiration* traversed across national, spatial, and temporal boundaries.

In Nair's view, collaborating with Sepia Gallery to organize the exhibition was a natural outgrowth of her work for the film. In an interview she commented, "I created it [the exhibit]. I made it happen, because of the photography that I love, and we created a really photographic film."[9] Like Nair's alternating use of color and bleached bypass to create both kinetic energy and stasis in the cinematic frame, the photographs compiled for the exhibition also generated contrasting moods. With the exception of Singh's miniature book installation, many of the medium and large-scale prints focused on solitary figures in anonymous urban or rural landscapes: images that exuded notions of solitude, repetition, and alienation. Though still images from the film (of Ashima and Ashoke, and their homes in Calcutta and Yonkers) hung in one room of the Sepia Gallery, the remaining walls in the gallery were hung with prints that contained no identifying mark. No didactic text noted the photographer, date, or location; these details were provided separately on a flyer available to viewers as they entered and exited the gallery. The literal lack of a framing device for the prints generated an alternative narrative of migration, one unmoored from South Asia and indeed from South Asians. At the Sepia Gallery, the "ethnic" specificity of the Ganguli family was absorbed into a larger, "universal" story of what it means to be an immigrant in the modern world.

Two prints from *Namesake: Inspiration* underscore the ways in which South Asian immigration is both central to and displaced from the exhibition. *Suitcase (Voyage)* a monochrome gelatin silver print by the American photographer Alison Bradley, depicts a single leather suitcase, a vintage model from the 1960s. Its neatly locked buckles and battered leather evokes the memory of past travels, but the suitcase also appears to be packed in anticipation of another journey in the future. Without an identification tag on its handles, the suitcase and its circuits of travel remain anonymous to the gallery viewer. Though *Suitcase (Voyage)* is an isolated large-scale print, at the Sepia Gallery Bradley's photograph was displayed adjacent to a still from *The Namesake* that depicts the marriage of Ashoke and Ashima. The viewer is encouraged to view this suitcase as one among many objects that make the long journey with the married couple from Calcutta to New York; perhaps it is also one of the many suitcases that we

later see in the film stuffed into Ashima's garage. Though Bradley's print can be easily incorporated into the narrative framework of Nair's film, the ubiquity of the suitcase (its non-descript design, its lack of visible owner) means that any viewer can claim this object. The suitcase is at once specific to the Ganguli's story, but it also exceeds the journey made by *The Namesake* as gallery viewers incorporate this object into their own (real and imagined) travels.

Further in the exhibition the photographer Mitch Epstein evokes the narrative tension between specific histories of migration and generic images of travel. In a print from his series *Untitled, New York*, Epstein depicts a middle-aged white man wearing a tightly buttoned suit on an escalator. The man is photographed against a crimson red wall, a color similar to the saturated red tones that Nair uses to define the Gangulis's suburban living room. Because the gallery viewer cannot see in which direction the escalator is moving, the passenger appears stuck, forever immobile. To be sure, the man's escalator ride is nowhere near as monumental as the Ganguli's migration. Yet it is precisely the mundane context of the print—the fact that the print could have been taken anywhere (in an office, an airport, a government building)—and the unknown nature of the man's pending encounter that amplifies the solitary nature of his journey. The unnamed protagonist of Epstein's print simultaneously stands in for Ashoke, who made his initial journey as a student to the United States on his own; and for Gogol Ganguli, who attempts to create a new life as an architect in New York City. But *Untitled, New York* also creates a sense of encounter and possibility that can be inhabited outside of the context of the film, perhaps by the gallery viewer herself. Indeed, it is precisely the lack of identifying geographical or temporal markers on the print that enable the viewer to see the print as a story of their own migration to this city.

*Namesake: Inspiration* showcased the many international photographers who have informed Mira Nair's own cinematic style. Yet the act of displaying and viewing these photographs created an alternate narrative of experience, one that was intensely personalized for the gallery viewer and divorced from the immediate context of the film. At Sepia Gallery, the narrative of middle-class South Asian migration that was central to the novel and to the film dissolved into a more ambiguous mode of seeing, one that was not framed by differences of national origin, race, or class. The

gallery show demonstrated the ways in which “ethnic” stories of belonging are easily (and uncritically) incorporated into “universal” narratives of migration. Even as *Namesake: Inspiration* was widely promoted by Nair as an accompaniment to her film, the exhibition diverged from both the film and the novel as the images generated a quintessentially “American” story of arrival.

As *The Namesake* made its way from print to cinema to photograph, I have argued that each version of the narrative requires distinct and interdependent frameworks of viewing. As a literary text, *The Namesake* focuses on the intergenerational narrative between Ashoke and Gogol, and in particular their different embodiments of nationhood via their reading of Nikolai Gogol’s “The Overcoat.” In contrast, the film displaces Gogol’s coming-of-age story to focus on the first-generation immigrant experience of Ashima and Ashoke. In so doing, Nair establishes spatial continuity between two disparate urban sites, New York and Calcutta. At the same time, her vision of a “new South Asian cool” deliberately excludes the lives of the majority of South Asians in New York City, particularly those who are working class. Finally, *Namesake: Inspiration* creates a narrative that moves beyond the experiences of South Asians in America. Unbound by markers of place and time, the photographs on display generated an anonymous, even ubiquitous, narrative of movement.

In many ways, *Namesake: Inspiration* is a catachresis for the film, even as it claims to be inspired by Nair’s project. As what Spivak described as a “useful but false” analogy, the photography exhibition is analogous to the literary and cinematic narrative but also displaced from it. Like the ways in which “Nikhil” could not capture the long history that shaped Gogol Ganguli, the photography exhibition refuses to historicize the migration of South Asians to the United States. Instead the gallery show circulates as a visual text in its own right, one that references but ultimately elides middle-class histories of South Asian migration. In much the same way that the film, to borrow Lahiri’s words, “transposed” the novel onto the screen, the exhibition transposes a specific geography of migration (from India to the United States, spanning the 1960s to the present) onto a visual experience that weaves across time and space. In the process, the fictional Ganguli story becomes a universal story, readily assimilated into the real-life experiences of any viewer. What is lost in translation is the critical

intervention that Jhumpa Lahiri's *Namesake* makes into categories of national identity, citizenship, and belonging.

An interdisciplinary reading of *The Namesake* illustrates not only the thematic convergence between the novel, the film, and the exhibition, but also the narrative dissonances that shape representations of South Asian migration. How middle-class Indians stand in for the heterogeneous class and national composition of South Asian immigrant communities; why "ethnic" subjects are made to embody "universal" stories of belonging; and what histories bind together South Asia and America are questions that circulate across all three texts. Bringing literary narratives in conversation with visual representations of South Asians in the United States, these multivalent iterations of *The Namesake* engender new ways of reading and viewing South Asian American public cultures.

## NOTES

1. As Lahiri explains in an interview, she officially has three names, including two "good" names, Nilanjana and Sudeshana. See Glassie, "Crossing Over."
2. See Anderson's seminal work on print cultures and the production of a national imaginary in *Imagined Communities*.
3. See Karlinsky for this account of Gogol's death, one of various interpretations that explain the author's untimely demise.
4. "Namesake," in *Concise Oxford Dictionary* 10th edition.
5. *OED Online*, www.dictionary.oed.com, accessed July 23, 2008.
6. See, for example, Giovanna.
7. See Das Gupta, *Unruly Immigrants*; Maira, *Desis in the House*; and Matthew, *Taxi*. All three scholars have produced an extensive ethnographic analysis of working and middle-class South Asian immigrant communities in New York City.
8. See Myers for a full review of the exhibition.
9. See Persons.

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## *Chapter 5*

# Affect, History, and the Ironies of Community and Solidarity in Jhumpa Lahiri's *Interpreter of Maladies*

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As detailed in the introduction to this volume, Jhumpa Lahiri has enjoyed an extraordinary success few writers ever hope to achieve, most notably by winning the Pulitzer Prize for her first book, the 1999 short story collection *Interpreter of Maladies*. Seeking to explain Lahiri's meteoric rise, reviewers of the American mainstream press sometimes seem caught in their efforts to reconcile her widespread appeal with her difference as a South Asian American writer and a writer of the Indian immigrant experience, a supposedly circumscribed milieu.[1] As Lenora Todaro puts it in her review of *Unaccustomed Earth* for *The Village Voice*, Lahiri is "an artist of a particular 'narrative': the Bengali family and its discontents as it assimilates into America. . . . Lahiri's story stock, however, is rife with characters that are larger than the Bengali immigration experience, experiences larger than mere discontent. She's an artist of the family portrait, drawing upon the shades of love that color us as we crawl from childhood to old age. . . ." Like Todaro's emphasis on what she calls Lahiri's "emotional wisdom," other reviewers have turned to Lahiri's savvy depiction of her characters' emotions and her ability to foster a reader's connection with her characters in this way. Michiko Kakutani of the *New York Times* writes of Lahiri's *Interpreter of Maladies*: "Ms. Lahiri chronicles her characters' lives with both objectivity and compassion while charting the emotional temperature of their lives with tactile precision" ("Liking America"). Likewise, in her

review of *Unaccustomed Earth*, Kakutani stresses Lahiri's "intimate knowledge of their conflicted hearts" and "her emotional wisdom and consummate artistry as a writer" ("Wonder Bread and Curry"). Charles Taylor, reviewing *Interpreter of Maladies* for *Salon.com*, emphasizes the "ardor of empathy" distinguishing the text and finds that "Lahiri's gift is to invest the ordinary with an emotion that makes us feel we're seeing it anew. What is beyond her empathy is not yet apparent." Reviewers consistently ground the appeal of Lahiri's writing in the effectiveness of her emotional portrait.

As many reviews also stress, the emotional complexities of Lahiri's characters play out in the dynamics of their relationships and the challenges of communication, the supposedly inner turmoil of emotion further frustrated in its outward reach toward others. Gillian Flynn's review of *Interpreter of Maladies* for *Entertainment Weekly*, locating Lahiri's inspiration in her background as a child of diaspora caught between worlds,[2] states: "Little wonder, then, that *Interpreter*'s tales revolve around communication: misinterpreted gestures, unexpressed longings, and the occasional shocking connection" (Flynn). When asked by *Newsweek* interviewer Vibhuti Patel if she would claim the role of "interpreter of our maladies of belonging," Lahiri responded: "It's not a role I contemplated, but the title haunted me for years. The characters I'm drawn to all face some barrier of communication. I like to write about people who think in a way they can't fully express." The emphasis on these inner/outer dynamics of communication and expression work together with the language of affect and emotion to situate Lahiri's widespread appeal in what's understood as the universal language of the human. It's not so much that she is appealing despite ethnic difference, but that difference is made safe by the emphasis on what seems to be universal.

Within Asian American Studies and other scholarly communities, Lahiri's success has been somewhat controversial. Rajini Srikanth's essay, "What Lies Beneath: Lahiri's Brand of Desirable Difference in *Unaccustomed Earth*," included in this volume, compellingly argues that Lahiri too easily satisfies "the sophisticated reader who seeks the nuanced and oblique appeal to her capacity to meet subtle 'difference' and foreignness" (62); however, Srikanth asserts, "the stranger she creates is in reality no stranger." (63) She finds that Lahiri's writing too easily indulges an

investment in a happy multiculturalism that does not pose any real difference or change. The opening pages of Gita Rajan's essay, "Ethical Responsibility in Intersubjective Spaces," detail the tension over the reception to Lahiri's work, with responses citing the trendiness of South Asian writers and the politics of award committees and global publishing. Rajan herself finds that Lahiri "tackles the immigrant experience from the safe distance of an acceptable stereotype formulated around the 1960s when South Asians struggled and melted into America, because they were perceived as an ethnic and not as a *racial minority*" (127). Even while Lahiri's characters are recognizably ethnic, there is a "taming and domesticating of South Asianness," as Rajan puts it (128), which makes that difference safe because the stereotypes are embedded in the familiarity of collective memory, which is also the site for emotional dynamics for Rajan: "memory in this framework signals a network of sepia-like images and ideas, to evoke forgotten or half-forgotten emotions that are partial and fluid and embedded unevenly at various levels in the collective locus of a nation" (127).

Purvi Shah's *Amerasia Journal* review of *Interpreter of Maladies* locates its Pulitzer Prize-winning success among American readers in a lack of overly direct threats of difference; she states, "*Interpreter of Maladies* is accessible to general audiences because it focuses on relationships and the emotional discomforts of assimilation, not on experiences or issues difficult to translate" (185). Shah ends the review positing the question: "What would happen to Lahiri's stories if the narrator was not always omniscient, if readers did not feel constant clarity about the characters' emotions?" (186). Lahiri's writing may very well encourage a sense of such clarity, and, as we have seen, one could turn to many reviews locating the appeal of her writing in terms of a universal, human connection on the level of emotional identification. I, however, would like to consider how the emotional resonance of Lahiri's story collection may bear its power precisely because it operates in less transparent ways—ways that question the borders of the subject; that lead to unexpected, contradiction-laden solidarities of a sort; and that depend for their effectiveness upon unspoken histories of contact.

This essay focuses on Jhumpa Lahiri's 1999 Pulitzer Prize-winning text, *Interpreter of Maladies*, in order to examine the ironies of solidarity and community as exemplified in the stories. Set in the United States and India,

the collection engages fragmented communities, attenuated relationships, transnational engagements, and unexpected alliances in a play of trust and betrayal. I turn to this text as a way to open up the catachrestic dimension of racial formations, to test the limits of the subject as the ground for politics, and to locate the emergence of communities and solidarities in the circulation of affect. It is not so much that I disagree with critics who find Lahiri's work too easily palatable[3]; my purpose here is not to argue that Lahiri's work in actuality functions as a mode of political resistance. I do, however, want to question the turn to emotions and emotional identification as an uninterrogated basis for a "universal" human connection (whether that connection be lauded or criticized). Employing a critical lens of affect and emotion lends another dimension to our understanding of Lahiri's work and allows us to see the ironic ways in which it might function. Sara Ahmed's work on affect and emotion has been useful to me here, and I will engage how Lahiri's collection features the collision of characters that result in what Ahmed calls the "surfacing" of community, in sometimes empowering, sometimes destructive ways. I will critically engage this concept of community together with Denise Riley's work on an ironic approach to identity in achieving solidarity. The ironic dimension of the alliances, communities, and solidarities that emerge through affect are shaped by historical relations that are telling in terms of race and difference. This approach to Lahiri's text has implications for how we understand the project of Asian American studies and how we approach the ethnic subject, for ideas of the subject and community are too easily based on assumptions of coherence and unity, while attention to difference, fracture, and contradiction may be more productive and enabling than initially realized.

It is not inconsequential that Lahiri's text takes the form of the short story collection. Stressing Lahiri's contribution to the short story form, Caleb Crain of the *New York Times Book Review* finds that "she brings her distinctive insight into the ways that human affections both sustain and defy the cultural forms that try to enclose them" (Crain). It's worth considering how the forms of the short story and the short story collection work in relation to the emotional dynamics of the stories and the conceptions of community and solidarity that emerge.

As literary critics of the genre have discussed, short story collections—alternatively called short story cycles or short story sequences—could be

argued to represent the dynamics of community through the conversation created among different perspectives. A notable and much-discussed example is Sherwood Anderson's *Winesburg, Ohio* (1919). The idea of a genre that is comprised of differing individual components to make up a more unifying whole has been used to explain why short stories and short story collections are particularly strong in American culture, as well as why they may play an important role in ethnic literature. Rocio Davis, in her work on Asian American short story cycles, states, "The fundamental structure of a cycle lies in the interaction of the elements in the independent stories as connective patterns on all levels draw these together into a totality strengthened by varying types of internal cohesion: a title, the development of a central character, the delineation of a community, or an explicit theme" (235). As for Asian American short story cycles more particularly, she states: "Asian American short story cycles may be viewed as formal and contextual manifestations of the pluralistic culture in which they are created and nourished, combining the traditional manner of narrating with contemporary literary devices and themes" (Davis 235–236). While Davis might take issue with calling Lahiri's *Interpreter of Maladies* a short story cycle, finding that the range of characters and contexts would place the text more in terms of a short story collection, Noelle Brada-Williams finds that the multiple stories of Lahiri's *Interpreter of Maladies* can be linked as a short story cycle through a thematic structure, notably a pattern of care and neglect (456). Brada-Williams also argues that Lahiri's text captures the complexity of an ethnic community through providing what she calls a "delicate balancing of representations," which is what allows for a "conversation among her pieces" (453).[4]

The tension between the individual stories and the text as a whole can belie the idea of a unifying structure and can mark the text with contradiction and irony. As Gerald J. Kennedy has discussed in his book *Modern American Short Story Sequences* (1995), the construction of what he calls a "fictive community" can be understood in both senses of the term. He finds that "the genre embodies an insistently paradoxical semblance of community in its structural dynamic of connection and disconnection" (195), and his reading of select short story sequences emphasizes the estrangement and alienation underlying representations of the supposedly most close-knit communities. Even the genre's understood affinity with oral

storytelling cultures due to its dynamic engagement of multiple perspectives (a point also made by Rocio Davis and Rachel Lee in regards to Asian American short fiction) may be found to be ironically embalmed in print culture, as Kennedy points out (194).[5]

I am drawn to these elements of contradiction, irony, and even anxiety that surround the genre, even while I locate tremendous political possibilities in its form. Indeed, these tendencies are not mutually exclusive. Rachel Lee, in her critical survey of Asian American short fiction, cites the work of Mary Louise Pratt on how short stories can allow writers to break out of established molds[6]. Lee then traces the uses of short fiction in relation to the late-twentieth century emergence of "Asian American" as an ethnic identity. Notably, she finds that short fiction showcases heterogeneity in a way that has undermined any set expectations for what the term "Asian American" means (Lee 269).

Here is where I locate a significant intersection of concerns in creating a critical framework for engaging Lahiri's text. The genre of the short story collection exhibits a tension between the expectation of or desire for coherence and the contradictions that undermine a sense of unity. This dynamic is one that haunts the ethnic studies project in its post-identity politics stage, and it calls to mind recent arguments to employ catachrestic approaches to Asian American studies and the Asian American subject. One could consider Susan Koshy's argument in "The Fiction of Asian American Literature" when she states that she "use[s] the term *catachresis* to indicate that there is no literal referent for the rubric 'Asian American'" and that we have the "responsibility to articulate the inner contradictions of the term and to enunciate its representational inconsistencies and dilemmas" (342). Rey Chow has made a similar argument in calling for "Chineseness [to] be productively put under erasure—not in the sense of being written out of existence but in the sense of being unpacked—and reevaluated in the catachrestic modes of its signification, the very forms of its historical construction" (18). Kandice Chuh, in her book *Imagine Otherwise*, employs deconstructive approaches to our ideas of the Asian American subject, which she argues "keeps contingency, irresolution, and nonequivalence in the foreground" (8), and which calls for "embracing the a priori subjectlessness of discourse" (26). In other words, finding critical models of subjectivity, community, and solidarity that do not assume or depend upon

establishing sameness, stability, or even coherence of identity is imperative. This, too, is what is at stake in this essay. Moreover, I find that employing such critical models allows for an engagement with histories of difference that surface through contradiction and irony.

My analysis works along this trajectory by turning to recent theories of affect and emotion.[7] Sara Ahmed's book, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, moves away from popular models of emotions, such as the "inside out" model that relies on an idea of emotions as something that people *have* internally and then work to *express* externally, or the "outside in" model that describes people internalizing emotions they experience socially (as in a crowd). Such approaches rest on assumed borders of a discrete subject that is contained by the individual body. Instead, she argues "that emotions create the very effect of the surfaces and boundaries that allow us to distinguish an inside and an outside in the first place" (10). She refers to what she calls the "intensification" of particular feelings that result in what Judith Butler has called "materialization," so that what we perceive as stable borders, boundaries, and surfaces are generated effects, indeed often uneven effects, secured by relations of power (24–25). This emphasis on contingency applies even to what we perceive as the incontrovertible nature of the body; for example, she reads Audre Lorde's experience of racist hate on a subway as shaping her perception of her body's contours through a white person's fear of touching the black body. Other readings engage how emotions establish the relationship between bodies and social space: the shrinking of the fearful or shameful body; the expansiveness of the body in love; the norms inscribed as the surfaces of bodies through compulsory heterosexuality. What is important here are the political effects of movement or circulation, and the resulting emphasis on orientation or what she calls "towardness," rather than on comforting ideas of universal human emotions that we all "have," which alleviate the threatening aspects of difference. The meanings of these moments of contact are shaped by historical relations that may or may not be consciously acknowledged. This approach has implications not only for our understanding of the relations between individuals, but also for the feelings that secure notions of collective bodies, whether that be the nation or ideas of community more oppositionally positioned.

If Ahmed's work is important to me because she foregrounds the "surfacing" that takes place through the circulation of emotion, indeed the history that manifests itself through that surfacing, then Denise Riley's work situates these concerns within the realm of language: how history arises through the irony and defamiliarization of the language that purports to represent the self and community. Riley's book, *The Words of Selves: Identification, Solidarity, Irony*, turns to what she finds to be two important affective dimensions of everyday language: the "felt unease" of linguistic guilt and verbal irony thatcome to the fore when one experiences a "lack of fit" with the language of identity one is supposed to inhabit. The resulting instability does not preclude political action. On the contrary, Riley offers a theory of solidarity that does *not* depend on the sharing of stable understandings of identity or sameness, indeed finds such a basis deadening, even dangerous, locating instead important political possibilities, citing the work of linguist Roman Jakobson, in the contradictions that facilitate the mobility of concepts and signs (163). What she calls a "solidarity of disaggregation" locates its strength, not only in the recognition of destabilizing differences constituting any category or community, but also in the dynamism of "reformulation," which allows for an uncomfortable yet essential mobility in meaning (175). It is this destabilizing and defamiliarizing that fosters a continual awareness of how "reality" is constructed and the political investments in that construction. In this way, attention to the ironic dimensions of self-conception realizes a temporal politics as well. Drawing on the work of Kierkegaard, Riley argues:

> "Irony, however, has no past," says Kierkegaard, [and Riley goes on to say] for it isolates, in order to interrogate a category. It rises above the solemn chrono-logy of descriptions, always poised to wrench a phrase out of its context. It commits this linguistic violence of dismembering, not gratuitously but as it exposes the contingent formation of that very context—and so, ultimately, restores its history to it. (183)

So the defamiliarizing work on which irony depends simultaneously relies for its effectiveness on an awareness of the historical chain of meanings that have accrued in the use of language. One appreciates and gets pleasure out of irony because of such an awareness of the word's history and the break from that history. This approach to irony as offering a historical lens comes to bear on my reading of Lahiri's stories as I examine the ironies of the

unusual, oftentimes temporary or provisional solidarities that present themselves. If Ahmed's work allows one to question the form of these relationships, the boundaries of the self and community, and the politics of the point of contact, then Riley's work foregrounds the ironic dimension of solidarities and the histories on which that irony is built.

In reading Lahiri's *Interpreter of Maladies*, I argue that the most critically productive engagements do not depend on establishing a universal basis of emotions, the sameness of which anyone can supposedly draw upon despite difference; instead, attention to more subtle and contradictory affective tensions in the collection allow for an awareness of defamiliarizing differences that politically position both characters and readers and complicate any easy notions of connection, community, and solidarity. As Lev Grossman wrote in *Time* about this "quiet Laureate," "Lahiri's stories are static, but what looks like stasis is really the stillness of enormous forces pushing in opposite directions, barely keeping one another in check." In *Interpreter of Maladies*, the tensions that shape and reshape relationships and communities come to the fore time and again in the stories. My readings work to engage the different and unsettling manifestations of feelings and the momentary, shifting, unstable alliances that can come as a result, illuminating the histories that give meaning to such contact.

The story "Mrs. Sen's" illustrates the dire effects of a lack of community through featuring a provisional point of solidarity between an older Indian woman, Mrs. Sen, and the young, white, American boy, Eliot, for whom she cares for a short time. Mrs. Sen, the wife of an immigrant professor, is trapped by the isolating and sterile university housing offered to them, where she remains home much of the day, particularly because she despises driving and is reluctant to learn. She struggles to maintain traditional modes of cooking and living, despite her lack of access to the ingredients, tools, and community upon which such traditions depend. She asks Eliot: "'Eliot, if I began to scream right now at the top of my lungs, would someone come?'" (116). She compares the isolation and apathy in the United States to her home in India where one would have to "just raise your voice a bit, or express grief or joy of any kind, and one whole neighborhood and half of another has come to share the news, to help with arrangements" (116). Eliot, whose perspective presented in the third person grounds the narrative, compares this scenario in his mind to the isolation in his own life and the

exclusion that he and his single, working mother experience at the hands of their neighbors. The alienation each feels shapes their contact and becomes the basis for an unlikely alliance, which all too quickly falls apart after a minor car accident they experience when Mrs. Sen attempts to get the fish she so desperately craves as an attempt at continuity with her former life. The story ends with the disintegration of the relationship between the woman and young boy that solidifies the isolation each feels: after the car accident, Eliot's mother takes him out of Mrs. Sen's care and he becomes what used to be called a "latch-key" kid. Mrs. Sen, we fear, will feel even less compelled to drive and will then be isolated in the university housing without Eliot and without even the small comforts that kept alive her past.[8]

While Mrs. Sen and Eliot both clearly experience forms of isolation and feelings of loneliness, and they develop a provisional and fragile sense of solidarity on this basis, their feelings of isolation are not necessarily the same. They know of each other's isolation only to a limited extent, their worlds being vastly different and their communication limited. The question here is not whether or not one can determine their feelings to be the same; rather, one must ask: what happens when their separate senses of loneliness rub up against one another, even if only for a short time? The irony of the solidarity between an older Indian woman and a young, white American boy paradoxically allows the history of their difference in the American context to rise to the surface. The sense of their solidarity—their connection, their investment in one another—is moving, but in recognizing it as such, we are made aware of why it is so moving: because it is so unusual, because of the differences that historically have kept such people apart in very different categories of identity and experience. The irony of the solidarity they do maintain for a time defamiliarizes those boundaries we take for granted and denaturalizes them, necessitating awareness of their historical construction. Their relationship ends, not because their alliance fails, but rather because their relationship was ended for them. Ostensibly, the caretaking arrangement ends because Mrs. Sen's accident indicates possible danger for Eliot; however, the mother's consistent discomfort in visiting the Sens' home gestures toward another explanation. The contact of their bodies consolidates the differences between them and foregrounds the histories of contact between white and brown peoples that hamper the

continuance of the alliance between Mrs. Sen and Eliot and discourages any alliance between the two women.

In her critical reading of the story, Madhuparna Mitra finds in Mrs. Sen an indulgence for nostalgia and a refusal to assimilate; Mrs. Sen's difference, therefore, becomes an obstacle. She asks, "at what point does the desire to preserve one's native culture become counterproductive or even destructive?" and finds that "Mrs. Sen makes very little effort to adapt to her new environment, and her single-minded devotion to replicating traditional cuisine is a sign of her deep estrangement from American culture" (186). I find troubling Mitra's emphasis on success or failure, determining Mrs. Sen "unable to forge a successful hyphenated identity" (187) and unwilling to make the "assimilative compromises" necessary (188). Indeed, one could turn to Sara Ahmed's conception of assimilation in a reversal of such an understanding of success or failure: "Assimilation involves a desire to approximate an ideal that one has already failed; an identification with one's designation as a failed subject" (150). For Mitra, Mrs. Sen refuses to let go of the past and therefore is unable to adjust to her present circumstances; the difference that Mrs. Sen retains threatens her ability to make a home in the United States.

Reading Mrs. Sen's loss through the lens of nostalgia is limiting; the framework of mourning/melancholia may offer more answers. As Ahmed writes in her chapter "Queer Feelings," "To preserve an attachment is . . . *to keep one's impressions alive*, as aspects of one's self that are both oneself and more than oneself, as a sign of one's debt to others" (160). She continues in an appropriation of melancholia as nonpathological, "To grieve for others is to keep their impressions alive in the midst of their death" (160) (normally, mourning would be considered healthy and melancholia would be considered pathological, but Ahmed follows in the same vein as say the work of David Eng and David Kazanjian on loss). The issue isn't that this history prevents her from assimilating and so she just needs to "let go." Keeping impressions alive is about retaining one's history, and in Mrs. Sen's case, her difference in the American context; the "debt to others" refers not only to the Indian community of the past, which constituted her identity, but, perhaps, to Eliot, too. This history arises through her melancholic attachment, which maintains it in the United States, and paradoxically, it allows for the irony of an alliance with a young, American

boy. The history that she retains not only accentuates her sense of loss of community but allows her to recognize in Eliot feelings of loneliness, too. Moreover, the relationship with Eliot works to keep that history alive and dynamic as she struggles to understand what it means within a new context; Eliot appears to be one of the few people with whom she can share that struggle. What becomes a problem, therefore, is not the difference she maintains, but the tendency to turn that difference, that history, into a point of division.

The opening story, “A Temporary Matter,” also presents the challenges of solidarity as histories arise, in this case through the course of a game. The story presents a young marriage tragically and poignantly pushed to its limits when their first child is prematurely delivered still-born. Months later, the intimate space created by a temporary nightly blackout in their neighborhood encourages the couple, Shoba and Shukumar, to play a game of divulging past secrets, which *seems* to bridge the estrangement that has prominently come between them since their loss; however, the story’s conclusion, when Shoba reveals that she has been looking for a new place to live, rewrites their game of supposedly growing intimacy as really a mourning ritual for their former visions of what their marriage had been and could have been.

The story most immediately takes on the structure of a trauma narrative: the before/after temporal structure that trauma evokes; the structure of repetitively returning that continually brings one back to the trauma, to the enormity of a moment that can’t fully be known but that won’t let one leave it behind. Much of the story focuses on the vitality of their marriage before the loss of their baby, compared to how it has stalled after the trauma. They continue to live with one another, attempting with varying success to go through the motions of their jobs and activities, but each one has lost his and her investment in the future and in their sense of solidarity with one another. This is the state in which they are caught and in which we find them at the start of the story. Their lives are paralyzed by the trauma, stuck in a form of their marriage that allowed them to thrive before the trauma, but which can’t accommodate the feelings they now have: their sorrow and anger at their loss, Shukumar’s guilt for being away at a conference when Shoba went into labor, perhaps even Shoba’s resentment of Shukumar’s absence at that moment even though she encouraged him to go; Shukumar’s

anxiety (what Sianne Ngai calls a future-oriented “expectation emotion”), which contributes to his paralysis and prevents him from moving forward, whether it be with his research or with the marriage that has come to a halt.

With the start of the nightly blackouts, they are forced out of their established habits for avoiding one another and pushed to engage one another. Shoba, drawing on an experience she had in India as a child, suggests that they pass the time playing a nightly game of revelations, sharing some bit of information about themselves the other might not know. The first evening revisits the earliest stages of their relationship, little hidden moments they each experienced that reveal the hopes they had for the relationship. At first, the knowledge they share seems to build greater understanding and connection, but, ironically, each revelation actually moves them away from an image of togetherness. As each evening passes, each person reveals more and more of an image of the self that has operated outside the solidarity of their marriage, and the revelations take on a harder edge: “Somehow, without saying anything, it had turned into this. Into an exchange of confessions—the little ways they’d hurt or disappointed each other, and themselves” (18). The revelations increasingly involve betrayals, culminating in the final evening when Shoba reveals that she has been looking for an apartment for herself, and Shukumar, in retaliation, reveals that he had arrived at the hospital in time to hold their still-born baby while Shoba slept, and that it was a boy, knowledge that Shoba had wanted withheld.

The game of revelations involves the circulation of affect: each revelation remobilizes their feelings for the other, whether those feelings involve love, anger, resentment, or guilt. The repetition of the ritual each evening, instead of contributing to a consistency and a growing stability, increasingly destabilizes their understandings of each other. Histories arise that shift the context for how they see each other. Indeed, this defamiliarizing takes on an erotic edge because it mimics the early stages of a relationship where one is forced to take risks and be vulnerable because of what is unknown about the other. Instead of bringing them closer, as might happen at the beginning of a relationship, this defamiliarizing allows them to see themselves outside of the solidarity that is supposed to define their marriage and ultimately allows them to mourn their relationship, this form of their marriage that no longer offers them a sense of the future. At the story’s conclusion, they are finally

able to grieve together: “They wept together, for the things they now knew” (22). Their final grieving together takes place through a sense of solidarity that emerges only because of the histories that arose in the circulation of affect that forced them to shift the terms of their relationship. In grieving together, they may finally be learning to live melancholically with the loss of their baby, although they are only able to do so once they have mourned or let go of their marriage.[9]

Awakening belatedly to loss and to a traumatic history is the focus of Rani Neutill’s essay, “Intimate Awakening: Jhumpa Lahiri, Diasporic Loss, and the Responsibility of the Interpreter,” included in this volume. Neutill utilizes the lens of trauma in order to understand the role of the interpreter as one that translates “the foreign and unassimilable nature of trauma and loss that wound each of the characters in her stories” (119). In doing so, the interpreter passes on an awakening to loss and to a history of trauma that may not be immediately accessible. Neutill focuses on the story “Interpreter of Maladies” in order to theorize the role of the interpreter of psychic trauma and loss as one that is applicable to all of the stories, and she asserts that Lahiri’s two stories featuring Partition illustrate how the diasporic subject, indeed Lahiri herself, who had not witnessed the Partition, nonetheless must bear witness to this trauma and pass on an awakening to it. As Neutill asserts, “Lahiri implies that the task of interpreting this pain falls on the individual who lives as one removed from the trauma” (129). The two stories, “When Mr. Pirzada Came to Dine” and “A Real Durwan” both feature the traumatic effects of Partition for those who survive: the refugees themselves—those forced to migrate—and the larger South Asian diaspora. I find that the characters and communities portrayed in these stories not only awaken to histories of trauma, but are themselves caught up in a continuing traumatization and fracturing as this history is borne through migration and reverberates at a temporal and spatial remove.[10]

Boori Ma, in the story “A Real Durwan,” is an example of someone who insistently embodies the history of Partition and loss, although the instability of that narrative—the variations that arise as she works to accommodate her new context—is what feeds into the discrediting of it and her. The story, set in India, features this character Boori Ma, a poor, older refugee woman who may or may not have lived a wealthier lifestyle before Partition, but who now cleans the lobby and stairwells of a large building,

the many residents of which depending upon her to "[stand] guard between them and the outside world" (73). Boori Ma is treated somewhat charitably by these residents, since she knows to keep her place, and her many stories of the wealth she supposedly experienced in her past life serve as a kind of entertainment, but when one of the households, the Dalals, achieve markers of a more affluent standing, the equilibrium of the community is thrown off. Suddenly, the building is flooded with workers as the other residents strive to improve their homes as well. Maintaining the gate becomes untenable, and Boori Ma starts to wander from the building. When treating herself in the marketplace to the smallest of indulgences, she is robbed of her small life savings and the keys to the building. The building is robbed, and Boori Ma is blamed and thrown out into the streets. It could be argued that the story is about the breakdown of a community due to greed, envy, or self-satisfaction, but I would like to reconsider it as the continual reformation of community with Boori Ma as the refugee object invested with feeling that secures the boundaries of that community, allowing her either an abject position or total exclusion.

Before the home renovations change the dynamics of the residential community, the feeling they exhibit toward Boori Ma could be described as contempt. Sianne Ngai, in her book *Ugly Feelings*, discusses this feeling by turning to Hobbes: ". . . the object of Hobbesian contempt, like that of its close relations, pity and disdain, is relatively harmless. Too weak or insignificant to pose any sort of danger, the object of contempt is perceived as inferior in a manner that allows it to be dismissed or ignored" (336). She situates contempt as a type of tolerance, at its negative extreme. Initially, the residents do tolerate Boori Ma, and they appreciate her efforts as a gatekeeper; however, her stories of her former life of luxury, while somewhat unsettling, are not taken seriously, particularly since the details sometimes shift or are contradictory. Her reply:

> "Why demand specifics? Why scrape lime from a betel leaf? Believe me, don't believe me. My life is composed of such griefs you cannot even dream them."
>
> So she garbled facts. She contradicted herself. She embellished almost everything. But her rants were so persuasive, her fretting so vivid, that it was not so easy to dismiss her. (72)

Some of the residents, like Mrs. Dalal, treat her charitably: "The residents, for their part, assured Boori Ma that she was always welcome [in their homes]" (76). She is, however, an abject figure on the fringes of this

community: “Knowing not to sit on the furniture, she crouched, instead, in doorways and hallways . . .” (76). Her inferior status is conveyed not only through her position sleeping underneath the letter boxes, but also through their patronizing attitude toward her and her stories of her former life: “she was a superb entertainer” (73). Boori Ma is an acceptable *durwan* or gatekeeper for the residents when her stories of the past are unreliable and therefore nonthreatening, when the outside world of violent dispossession and forced migration is only a story to them, and when she remains bound to them.

Madhuparna Mitra (in a separate essay from the one cited above) provides a compelling analysis of “A Real Durwan” that emphasizes the “simmering hostility toward Boori Ma in the community” due to her “air of putative superiority” to the lower-middle class residents generated by her tales of former wealth (“Border Crossings” 242). Moreover, she concludes: “I view Boori Ma as a representative refugee and suggest that her ousting reveals the general indifference, if not outright hostility, displayed by West Bengalis toward East Bengali migrants” (Mitra, “Border Crossings” 244). Mitra effectively links the class tension (the residents’ pleasure of feeling superior to someone who once may have been of a higher class) to the tensions of nations in flux and in formation, marked by the violent legacy of colonialism, refugee flows, and the social upheaval that accompanies forced migrations.

I wish to take Mitra’s analysis a step further and ask: but why do they find this refugee, the figure of Partition, so appropriate (at least initially) to keep at their gate, as someone who “stood guard between them and the outside world” (Lahiri 73)? In her discussion of contempt, Ngai also turns to the work of William Ian Miller: “As Miller also notes, ‘One can condescend to treat them decently, one may, in rare circumstances, even pity them, but they are mostly invisible and utterly and safely *disattendable*’” (337, italics added by Ngai). Boori Ma is initially tolerated, not only because her alleged downfall allows them a measure of superiority, but because she, as a refugee, is “disattendable.” They do not feel any real obligation to her (any acts of charity only consolidating their superiority). As a token refugee, her proximity works to reassure them that they “know” her; her immobility affords them a measure of control.[11] Moreover, the history of Partition she represents becomes “disattendable” in this sense as well. The residents can

disassociate themselves from feeling implicated in her fate: she is simply a "victim of changing times," as Mr. Chatterjee likes to say (72). As the story notes, Mr. Chatterjee "had neither strayed from his balcony nor opened a newspaper since Independence, but in spite of this fact, or maybe because of it, his opinions were always highly esteemed" (72).

After the workers start to flood the building for the residents' renovations, Boori Ma starts to venture from the gate, farther and farther out into the world. It is at this point that she is robbed of her life savings and keys, and the building is robbed. She no longer "[stands] guard between them and the outside world"; indeed, from the residents' perspective, she has brought that world back with her, and it has infiltrated their community. Boori Ma claims her innocence, and her refrain changes from "Believe me, don't believe me" to "Believe me, believe me," but the residents expel her from their community. It is when she becomes mobile, venturing beyond their threshold, and when she claims validity for what she says, that she can no longer be tolerated. But it's not simply that Boori Ma's behavior changes and that she ventures out into the world, bringing that world back with her. She may represent the legacy of Partition, but the residents are attempting to live more upscaled lives and are increasingly invested in a narrative of progress, which allows little room to be implicated in a trauma of the past. Mr. Chatterjee affirms that it is not necessarily Boori Ma who is changing: "'Boori Ma's mouth is full of ashes. But that is nothing new. What is new is the face of this building. What a building like this needs is a real *durwan*'" (82).

While contempt may be the dominant feeling the residents have toward Boori Ma, it is fear—fear of the outside world and the social upheavals stemming from a traumatic past—that rises to the fore and dominates the turning point of this narrative. Sara Ahmed discusses the politics and temporality of fear as it secures the collective through restricting the mobility of others. Fear, she argues, is organized around the anticipated (future-oriented) approach of an object that may or may not pass one by. It is the very uncertainty of this feared approach that allows for the continued openness of the threat. She discusses how fear manifests itself as a "border anxiety": "anxiety and fear create the effects of borders, and the effect of that which we are not. The transgression of the border is required in order for it to be secured as a border in the first place. As such security involves

the securing of ‘the not,’ which paradoxically requires the insecurity of ‘the not’” (Ahmed 76). In other words, the borders of the collective are an effect of maintaining a constant sense of threat.

It is the residents’ fear of the outside world that feeds their contempt of Boori Ma, for she, the token refugee object, manages and contains their fear of that world precisely because of her disattendable status as an object of contempt. She secures the boundaries of the community in this way. Her sudden mobility, however, means she’s no longer manageable. As Ahmed states, “the mobility of some bodies involves or even requires the restriction of the mobility of others” (70). Not just with the robbery, but also with the home improvements, the residents have a renewed awareness of the world outside their gate, and their feelings of fear of that outside world have become remobilized. The community forms and reforms through their investment in the border/object, which shifts as their fear is remobilized. Their narrative of progress is threatened by the historical legacies of the trauma of Partition, no longer contained by their token refugee object, and so they seek to reform and reconsolidate the community but with another object securing its boundaries: a real *durwan*.

I have focused here on only three of the stories of Lahiri’s *Interpreter of Maladies*, but one could easily identify similar dynamics in the other six stories that comprise the collection. “When Mr. Pirzada Came to Dine” engages a traumatic history of the formation of present-day Pakistan and Bangladesh through an unusual point of solidarity between an older Pakistani man and a young Indian American girl (a relationship that also casts a critical light on Americans and history). “Interpreter of Maladies” and “Sexy” both feature provisional relationships that test solidarities and illuminate histories of accumulated associations through a play of desire and betrayal. “The Treatment of Bibi Haldar,” like “A Real Durwan,” critically spotlights the formation of communities and the responsibility to the abject figures at their edges (as Noelle Brada-Williams has noted, the collective female “we” narrating the story was Lahiri’s experiment with William Faulkner’s technique in “A Rose for Emily” [461]). “This Blessed House” and particularly “The Third and Final Continent” both recall Sara Ahmed’s discussion of the temporal and spatial dimensions of wonder: “wonder allows us to see the surfaces of the world *as made*, and as such wonder opens up rather than suspends historicity. Historicity is what is

concealed by the transformation of the world into 'the ordinary,' into something that is already familiar or recognisable" (179). In the case of each story, histories surface through the circulation of affect, which serves to align or divide the characters in a rethinking of the role of difference for conceptions of identity, solidarity, and community. The unusual solidarities, connections, and emotional investments that Lahiri features in her short stories give shape to the world each character inhabits and bring awareness to the contours through the contradictions and ironies that emerge when those worlds come into contact. Instead of thinking about affect and emotion as the common or universal denominator of those worlds that makes the difference between them negligible, I draw critical attention to the ironies of those solidarities to consider how our very perception of such irony depends upon material histories that may too easily go unacknowledged.

Lahiri's work may indeed shy away from the incontrovertible and egregious aspects of race and racism; overall, her stories do not lead us to connect class status to the politics of race and immigration or to consider the heterogeneity of South Asian America. This allows many audiences to read her without feeling too threatened by ethnic difference and without feeling any need to engage that difference. Using the lens of affect, however, allows us to see how even the most intimate relationships among characters speak to unacknowledged histories of contact in their irony and contradiction. We can only understand the defamiliarizing work of irony and contradiction because of that history.

## NOTES

1. Lev Grossman, for *Time Magazine*, writes somewhat tongue-in-cheek: "The success of *Unaccustomed Earth* is an anomalous data point, but it should tell us things about ourselves. Such as: we're way more interested in Bengali immigrants than we thought we were."

2. Flynn notes that Lahiri was born in London, grew up in Rhode Island, and as a child regularly spent significant amounts of time in Calcutta with family.

3. See also Lavina Dhingra (Shankar)'s essay, "Not Too Spicy: Exotic Mistresses of Cultural Translation in the Fiction of Chitra Divakaruni and Jhumpa Lahiri."

4. The terms "short story collection," "short story cycle," and "short story sequence" are not necessarily used interchangeably; indeed, the different terms arose in order to note distinctions along the gradations of thematic coherence and how meaning is built in the progression of stories. I myself am less concerned about whether Lahiri's text should be considered a "collection," a "cycle," or a "sequence." As Mary Louise Pratt stated in her essay, "The Short Story: The Long and the Short of

It," exploring the contingent relationship between the short story and the novel, "Genres can be characterized not by an unambiguous discovery procedure for classifying texts, but by a cluster of characteristics and tendencies, only some of which may be present in a given text" (93). I am also influenced by Wai Chee Dimock's imperative to consider genres in the "unfinished sense, with spillovers at front and center" (1378).

5. Stephen Amidon's article, "Can She Save the Short Story?," printed in *The Times* of London, leads with the example of Jhumpa Lahiri and concludes his discussion of the state of British and American short stories fearing that the genre will lose its historical connection with the public and popular culture due to the increasing role of academia in generating short stories.

6. Pratt's influential essay also discusses how the short story works "to introduce new regions or groups into an established national literature, or into an emerging national literature in the process of decolonization" (104), illustrating how an analysis of the genre would be useful for the projects of ethnic studies and postcolonial studies.

7. I follow the approach of many contemporary theorists in literary and cultural studies in using the terms "affect" and "emotion" somewhat interchangeably; however, there is significant debate regarding distinctions between the terms. See Ngai's introduction to *Ugly Feelings,* particularly pages 24–27, for an overview of attempts to make distinctions between the terms on the basis of a subjective/objective structure, even while she herself chooses to use the terms "more or less interchangeably" (27). The first footnote to Sedgwick's introduction to *Touching Feeling* usefully and concisely describes the affect theorist Silvan Tomkins' distinction: "For Tomkins, a limited number of affects—analogous to the elements of a periodic table—combine to produce what are normally thought of as emotions . . ." (24). Sedgwick uses the terms interchangeably until discussing Tomkins. Rei Terada, in her introduction to *Feeling in Theory: Emotion After the "Death of the Subject,"* does work to maintain distinctions between the terms, placing "emotion" more in terms of psychological experience and "affect" more in terms of physiological experience (with "feeling" as a reference to the "common ground" between the two) (4).

8. Given the story's narration from Eliot's point of view, and given the introduction's comparison among different caregivers, the title seems to imply a missing word, as if Eliot were saying "Mrs. Sen's place" or "Mrs. Sen's house." The absence of the implied final word in the title, therefore, not only indicates an absence of this sense of home at the apartment building but also begs the question: what indeed belongs to her? The missing object foregrounds her loss and shifts the emphasis from the object itself to the sense of absence and loss.

9. In her discussion of mourning and melancholia, Ahmed writes, "The question of how to respond to loss requires us to rethink what it means to live with death" (159).

10. I go on to discuss the story "A Real Durwan" at length. As for "When Mr. Pirzada Came to Dine," it may seem too strong to say that the knowledge of Partition traumatizes the young character Lilia; however, her relationship with Mr. Pirzada, her growing awareness of the possible effects of Partition's violence, and even the growing sense that she must protect the Pirzadas (through ritual and even through a reluctance to discuss their situation with those who might not understand) all signify a rupture in her former sense of self and contained geopolitical awareness. The history of Partition radically disrupts and displaces the neat narrative of American history she is repeatedly taught at school.

11. A sense of immobility is something specifically tied to feelings of contempt. Ngai cites Hobbes' definition of contempt from *Leviathan*: "'Those things which we neither desire, nor hate, we are said to *contemn*: CONTEMPT being nothing else but an immobility, or contumacy [obstinacy] of the heart, in resisting the action of certain things'" (336). I will go on to connect this emphasis on immobility with contempt to the issues of mobility in fear.

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# *Chapter 6*

# Intimate Awakening

## *Jhumpa Lahiri, Diasporic Loss, and the Responsibility of the Interpreter*[1]

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In Chapter 7 of the *Interpretation of Dreams* Sigmund Freud relates a dream he finds perplexing enough to repeatedly return to it. Freud recounts the dream as follows:

> Among the dreams which have been communicated to me by others there is one which is at this point especially worthy of our attention. It was told to me by a female patient who had heard it related in a lecture on dreams. Its original source is unknown to me. This dream evidently made a deep impression upon the lady, since she went so far as to imitate it, that is, to repeat the elements of this dream in a dream of her own; in order, by this transference, to express her agreement with a certain point in the dream.
>
> The preliminary conditions of this typical dream were as follows: A father had been watching day and night beside the sick-bed of his child. After the child died, he retired to rest in an adjoining room, but left the door ajar so that he could look from his room into the next, where the child's body lay surrounded by tall candles. An old man, who had been installed as a watcher, sat beside the body, murmuring prayers. After sleeping for a few hours the father dreamed that *the child was standing by his bed, clasping his arm and crying reproachfully: 'Father, don't you see I'm burning?'* The father woke up and noticed a bright light coming from the adjoining room. Rushing in, he found that the old man had fallen asleep, and the wrappings and one of the arms of his beloved child's dead body had been burned by a lighted candle that had fallen on him . . .
>
> The words spoken by the child must have been made up of words which he had actually spoken in his lifetime and which were connected with important events in the fathers mind. For instance, "I'm burning" may have been spoken during the fever of the child's last illness, and "Father don't you see?" may have been derived from other highly emotional situations of which we are in ignorance. (403–404)

Freud initially reads this dream as the wish fulfillment on the part of the father to see his child again, but then returns to the dream later in the chapter to find that it is bound up with a more profound and enigmatic wish,

the desire to sleep. Jacques Lacan rereads Freud's interpretation in "Tuche and Automaton," shifting the question from, "What does it mean to sleep?" to "What does it mean to awaken?" In *Unclaimed Experience*, Cathy Caruth extends both Freud's and Lacan's reading to suggest that the awakening of the father by the dream is a repetitive awakening to the trauma of his son's death—a death he has seen too late. This belated awakening is the nature of being a survivor of traumatic events which bears an ethical responsibility: for Caruth the son's question—"Father, don't you see I'm burning?"—can also be read as, "father, wake up, leave me, survive to tell the story of my burning" (105). The father, whose burden is to tell the tale of burning, is continually reconstituted by the belatedness of his son's address, but also the demand that he survive to tell the story. I return to this dream over the course of this chapter and to a few key points: the fact that Freud and his patient learn of this dream indirectly through second-hand sources, the question of awakening to trauma and loss, the ethical burden created by survival, and the son's haunting question: "Father, don't you see I'm burning." I will return to these themes as they relate to Jhumpa Lahiri's Pulitzer Prize-winning collection of short stories *Interpreter of Maladies.*

In this chapter I argue that the task of the interpreter in literary studies has often been relegated to the realm of linguistic and cultural translation, while the work of psychic interpretation has remained under theorized. In Lahiri's collection, I suggest that the interpreter of maladies is actually not only an interpreter of culture and language but also an interpreter of the psychic implications of loss. I demonstrate this through a close reading of Lahiri's title short story "Interpreter of Maladies" and "When Mr. Prizada Came to Dine." This reading contributes to a nuanced understanding of the multiple psychic implications of losses experienced by the South Asian diaspora, including the August 15, 1947, Partition of India into India and Pakistan.

## INTERPRETATION, LOSS, AND THE ETHICAL BURDEN OF SURVIVAL

In her essay "Not Too Spicy: Exotic Mistresses of Cultural Translation in the Fiction of Chitra Divakaruni and Jhumpa Lahiri," Lavina Dhingra Shankar argues that Lahiri's characters operate as "cultural translators" (25). In fact, Lahiri has called herself a translator. To refer to herself as a

cultural translator is an astute self-description, but as Dhingra Shankar notes, Lahiri goes further. Lahiri asserts translation as the fundamental basis for her being in a clearly Cartesian fashion, she writes, “And whether I write as an American or as an Indian, about things American or Indian or otherwise, one thing remains the constant: I translate therefore I am” (37).[2] Lahiri shifts the Cartesian *cogito*.[3] To think and therefore be versus the ability to translate and therefore exist, makes the basis for *being* radically different. It is one thing to think and therefore positively know one’s existence as real; it is a subjectivity based on the relationship of the subject to itself. It is quite another to be constantly foreign, constantly translating, an existence that is not without the recognition and relationship to an Other.

However this self-description of translation is limited. Lahiri also writes, “Almost all of my characters are translators insofar as they must make sense of the foreign to survive.”[4] While the work of translation studies in and about South Asia has opened a series of debates around the importance of English versus *bhasha* (native) languages and the necessity and impossibility of translation, I would like to shift the question of translation from its linguistic and cultural concerns for a moment to reconsider the two above statements made by Lahiri. To make sense of the ”foreign” almost always conjures thoughts of cultural, linguistic, and national displacement. But if we juxtapose the idea that Lahiri admits that all of her characters must make sense of the foreign in order to survive alongside the title of her collection and the title short story itself, I argue that we have to consider that the foreign can be something beyond the linguistic and cultural. If we ponder the interpretation and translation of *psychic maladies* and not language nor culture, what do we find?

Psychic maladies are more often than not caused by loss or traumatic experience. Caruth writes of trauma:

> the event is not assimilated or experienced fully at the time, but only belatedly, in its repeated possession of the one who experiences it. To be traumatized is precisely to be possessed by an image or event . . . The traumatized, we might say, carry an impossible history within them, or they become themselves the symptom of a history that they cannot entirely possess. (*Trauma: Explorations in Memory* 4–5)

Given Caruth’s understanding of trauma as something that the traumatized subject repeats in an effort to understand and digest that which was not understood upon first impact, and the fact that in all of Lahiri’s stories (here

*Interpreter of Maladies*) and larger works of fiction (*The Namesake*), I claim that Lahiri is also translating the foreign and unassimillable nature of trauma and loss that wound each of the characters in her stories. Moreover, as Caruth suggests, the actual subject of trauma is incapable of possessing the history of trauma that besieges them. Lahiri turns to a history of trauma that she herself has not been witness to—the Partition. By dedicating two of her stories ("When Mr. Pirzada Came to Dine" and "A Real Durwan") to the Partition she makes sense of the foreign, the symptomatic effects of a trauma that wound both a nation and its diaspora. In the title story Lahiri writes of a cultural and linguistic translation that fails and is replaced with psychic awakening. This story and its allegorical tale of awakening to loss tells us more about the South Asian diasporic experience than solely the ways in which one feels *physically* foreign in a new land. Lahiri's collection shifts the emphasis from cultural and linguistic translation to psychic interpretation of trauma and loss, and this shift from language and culture to the psychic can be traced through a reading of her title short story and the relationship that is forged between Mrs. Das and Mr. Kapasi. This story is the basis for understanding all the losses that are part of being a South Asian diasporic subject, including the broader historical losses that resulted from the Partition of India.

Returning to Freud's reading of the dream of the burning child, I want to highlight a part of the passage that Caruth does not refer to nor cite in her reading of the dream:

> This dream evidently made a deep impression upon the lady, since she went so far as to imitate it, that is, to repeat the elements of this dream in a dream of her own; in order, by this transference, to express her agreement with a certain point in the dream. (*Unclaimed Experience* 403)

Both Freud and his patient did not dream nor experience the death of this child, and yet as noted before Freud repeatedly returns to it and his patient "redreams" it. As Caruth tells, the child's story does live on, and the father's ethical burden of having survived his son's death is the passing of his son's story and words. Citing Lacan, Caruth argues that traumatic repetition "demands the new" and that the "newness is enacted in the fact that the words are no longer mastered or possessed by the one who says them—by the child who has died and for whom it is eternally too late to speak, or by the father who receives the words as coming from the place of the child . . .

the words are *passed on* as an act that does not precisely awaken the self but, rather, *passes the awakening on to others"* (*Unclaimed Experience* 107). Thus, the passing on of an awakening happens to others, to those "who hear the words." Given that Caruth stresses the passing on of an awakening to others, her omission of the patient's integration of the dream is striking. Caruth's tracing of the dream of the burning child is a tracing of psychoanalysis through prosopography, the study of elites and their intellectual production. In omitting the patient as the conduit through which Freud learns of the dream and the impact that the dream has on the patient herself, Caruth neglects what should be the most important subject in psychoanalysis—the patient. In my reading of Lahiri's work, I propose that what is also missed is the psychic impact her stories have on the reader, readers of the South Asian diaspora, who can be awakened to loss. This "awakening" as I will describe it, is in fact the work of the author and text, to awaken in us that which has been forgotten, to give us memories, stories that come in a belated form of address, histories that could not "originally" be apprehended or "seen."

It is common among Bengali children of the subcontinent and diaspora to hear stories of the Partition. This is undoubtedly true for Lahiri, and no doubt part of why she has two stories in the collection that deal specifically with this moment in modern South Asian history. Lahiri—like Freud and his patient who only indirectly hear of the child's story—is not an actual witness to the trauma of the Partition of India. As a child of the diaspora, Lahiri has heard stories of the Partition are passed on through generations, and Lahiri, as an interpreter, like Freud, relays these stories in order to pass on an awakening to others of this traumatic event in South Asian history, so that readers in much the same way as Freud and his patient can integrate the trauma into their own psyche and can awaken others. Being a South Asian diasporic subject, Lahiri is a survivor of the Partition and her ethical responsibility is to pass on the stories that would otherwise be untold, and this ethical responsibility is the passing on of an awakening to her readers and a diaspora to its losses.

Throughout *Interpreter of Maladies,* Lahiri explores her role and responsibility as author in conveying different forms of loss. Although the two stories "When Mr. Pirzada came to Dine" and "A Real Durwan" deal explicitly with the losses of Partition, I read the title short story instead. I do

this because the story is actually a better allegory for describing South Asian diasporic literature's ability to intervene at the level of cultural illness and trauma. Although Lahiri's title narrative is about personal intimate grief, it allegorically demonstrates the ways in which literature can apprehend and awaken many forms of loss, including the national and diasporic. What I am suggesting here is that the title story, "Interpreter of Maladies," in turning away from the thematic representation of Partition, maps the intimate phenomenology of loss and grief that cannot be uncoupled from the political or historical losses that saturate the volume. These stories, where history gets in the way of memory and memory obstructs the paths of history, collectively chart out the complexities of the South Asian diaspora. I examine Lahiri's title and title short story as a means of exploring the intersection of literature and psychoanalysis and the work of South Asian Anglophone literature in apprehending the losses and remains of the Partition of India. I do this by invoking the terms laid out in the dream of the burning child (the ethical burden of survival, what it means to awaken, and the child's question: Father don't you see I'm burning?).

## PARTITION AND TRAUMA

Although there are many forms of loss that define the South Asian experience and thus its diaspora, the Partition remains a pivotal traumatic event in modern South Asian history. On August 15, 1947, undivided British India was partitioned into two new, independent nations, India and Pakistan. The decolonization of British India, and the creation of India and Pakistan as newly sovereign countries was a process of blood. Death, displacement, rape and starvation plagued approximately 20 million people. Independence thus became co-terminus with Partition; the twinned events are always remembered on the subcontinent as two sides of the same coin of history. Large-scale violent conflict between different religious communities—mainly Hindus and Muslims, but also Sikhs, Christians, and Parsis—during Partition left a legacy of what is called, in postcolonial South Asia, "communalism" or "communal violence." There has been significant research and writing on the Partition, including but not limited to Urvashi Butalia's *The Other Side of Silence,* the work of Veena Das, Suvir Kaul's edited anthology *The Partitions of Memory: The Afterlife of the*

*Division of India*, Gyendra Pandey's *Remembering Partition*, Baskar Sarkar's *Mourning the Nation: Indian Cinema in the Wake of Partition*, and Kavita Daiya's *Violent Belongings: Partition, Gender, and National Culture in Postcolonial India*.[5] My objective in reading Lahiri's collection—and in particular what it means to be an "interpreter of maladies"—is to point out the specific ways in which her identity as once-removed (like Freud and his patient who hear of the dream of the burning child second-hand) from the events of the Partition through being a diasporic subject and specifically an Asian American, makes her relationship to the catastrophic events that preceded her such that she can awaken readers to losses that were not previously consciously figured. The awakening of readers to loss is made possible by having seen too late, like the father in the dream, who must bear witness as the ethical burden that is entailed by being a survivor of traumatic events.

## INTERPRETING MALADIES

The title story describes the different occupations of a tour guide, Mr. Kapasi, as he takes a young Indian American couple and their children—the Das family—on a tour of the sun temple in Konarak, India. Our first impression of Mr. Kapasi is simple. He has few distinguishing features. He works as a tour guide, and there is no original intimation of the intricacies of his role as an interpreter. Lahiri describes him as a middle-aged man, "forty six years old, with a receding hair line that had gone completely silver" (45). In contrast, the description of the Das family and in particular, Mrs. Das, is elaborate because it stems from the observations of Mr. Kapasi, identifying him directly as the narrator and interpreter of the story. Mr. Kapasi details how Mrs. Das dresses, the bickering between her and Mr. Das, and how she handles her children.

As the tour begins, conversation unfolds, and the Das family finds out that Mr. Kapasi spends most of his days as a linguistic translator in a doctor's office where, because of his ability to speak numerous languages, he relays the complaints of different Gujrati patients. Mr. Kapasi is reluctant to describe his job as interpreter for he finds "nothing noble in interpreting people's maladies" (51). He finds the relating of bodily symptoms of

patients a tireless, thankless, and unimportant activity. Earlier in his life he had dreamed of being an interpreter between nations:

> His job was a sign of his failings. In his youth he'd been a devoted scholar of foreign languages . . . He had dreamed of being an interpreter for diplomats and dignitaries, resolving conflicts between people and nations, settling disputes of which he alone could understand both sides . . . at one point in his life he was confident he could converse, if given the opportunity, in English, French, Russian, Portuguese, and Italian, not to mention Hindi, Bengali, Orissi, and Gujrati. Now only a handful of European phrases remained in his memory. (52)

Mr. Kapasi does not dream of being an interpreter of maladies, but dreams of being an interpreter "between nations," what he describes as an ability to "settle disputes." What he defines as a more important job for an interpreter —settling disputes between nations—is initially set up in opposition to literature's ability to address the relation between the nation and the individual. But as the text implies, Mr. Kapasi does interpret between nations but not on the scale he imagined. In his work as a tour guide, which brings him in contact with clients like the Indian American Mrs. Das, he interprets nation to nation on an inter-subjective level. Furthermore, because the story foregrounds the importance of interpretation between individuals, the reader is forced to become conscious of his or her own role as an interpreter of texts and others. Mr. Kapasi's relationship with Mrs. Das allegorizes the relation between reader and text, whether the text is a national subject or is a short story. The more important role of interpretation turns out not to be the ability *literally* to translate languages, or settle disputes, but to act as a narrative relay between reader and text.

The narrative relationship that Lahiri sets up between Mr. Kapasi and Mrs. Das is analytic. Analytic because it is as much the work of the analyst as it is the narrative interpreter to mediate between languages of pain. In doing so, Lahiri metonymically interrogates her own role as a kind of analyst in interpreting different forms of loss. The role of psychoanalysis in interpreting collective grief is difficult because, "the immense range of living circumstances and character differences adds new and unknown factors" (Mitscherlich xxv). Mr. Kapasi's desire to be an interpreter between nations, and the alternative relationship that is set up between him and Mrs. Das, illuminates the intersection that Lahiri's work poses in her ability to deal with individual and collective loss through the multiple stories in the text. The title narrative sets the framework for the workings of

the author in interpreting maladies, whether it be “between nations” or individuals.

Mrs. Das reads Mr. Kapasi’s job of translating different somatic symptoms of patients to doctors who cannot speak the same language, as both “romantic,” and a “big responsibility,” ascribing an almost magical quality to his occupation. She unwittingly illuminates the rather intricate and delicate nature of Mr. Kapasi’s role as interpreter, and illuminates the broader meanings of interpretation.

Considering that a doctor can only identify and then cure an illness upon recognizing its source through reading the symptoms, Mr. Kapasi’s job as interpreter takes on a life-or-death value. Mrs. Das asks Mr. Kapasi to describe the details of his occupation, emphasizing its importance. Mr. Kapasi ignores the possibility that his job is potentially significant. He replies to Mrs. Das’s comments in disbelief: “How do you mean? How could it be?” (51). She asks him to describe one of his interactions with a patient. He describes a patient who felt like he had pieces of straw in his throat. Mrs. Das replies:

> These patients are totally dependent on you . . . in a way more dependent on you than the doctor . . . for example, you could tell the doctor that the pain felt like a burning, not straw. The patient would never know what you had told the doctor, and the doctor wouldn’t know that you had told the wrong thing. It’s a big responsibility. (51)

Mrs. Das implies that the translation of somatic symptoms entails a moral obligation to both the doctor and patient. The barrier of linguistic difference makes the responsibility of the interpreter tantamount. The work of the interpreter as communicator is to be both reliable and honest, with a responsibility that has life-or-death consequences. Thus, as the mediator between patient and doctor, Mr. Kapasi holds a significant amount of power. He is the only person capable of relating the symptoms of patients, and if he chooses to, the sole person capable of misinterpreting them, placing patients in harm’s way. He must “bear witness” for the patient, and in doing so the patient is much “more dependent on him than the doctor,” as he becomes fundamentally responsible for the processes by which they are healed. Lahiri uses Mr. Kapasi as a literal “interpreter of maladies” but extends the nature of his interpretation to the psychic. After all, somatic distress is often propelled by psychic duress and this relationship between

body and mind is what compels Mrs. Das to seek out Mr. Kapasi's help as an interpreter of her own maladies.

Mr. Kapasi may be an interpreter of maladies in a purely literal sense but Lahiri challenges the literalness of his job. He becomes, in the eyes of Mrs. Das, not only a translator of bodily injury but of psychic wounding. His abilities take on an enchanted quality, something akin to Claude Levi-Strauss's definition of the Shaman, which he correlates to the role of the analyst:

> The Shaman provides the sick woman with a *language* by means which unexpressed, and otherwise inexpressible, psychic states can be immediately expressed. And it is the transition to this verbal stage . . . which induces the release of the physiological process, that is, the reorganization in a favorable direction . . . In this respect, the shamanistic cure lies on the borderline between our contemporary physical medicine . . . and such psychological therapies as psychoanalysis. (198)

Levi-Strauss's definition of the work of the shamanistic analyst is similar to Freud's definition of the work of mourning, Caruth's theory of trauma, and in Lahiri's collection, the work of the author. The Shaman, according to Levi-Strauss gives the "woman" the linguistic ability to express the otherwise inexpressible. This linguistic turn places her in a process of "favorable direction." The process of "favorable direction" is resonant with Freud's definition of mourning. In Freud's notion of mourning, it is the conscious recognition of the object as lost that propels the process. Language acts as the means by which the loss is recognized in that it enables the subject to represent to him or herself the lost object through both words and memories. Once this task is completed the "ego becomes free and uninhibited again" (166) echoing Levi-Strauss' theory of the "release of the physiological process, that is, the reorganization in a favorable direction."

Mrs. Das seeks the help of Mr. Kapasi in an analytic address as she is in psychic distress. And we shall see in the mode of counter-transference, so is Mr. Kapasi. Caruth elaborates that when traumatic events are of a psychic nature, they are not known in their full capacity. In fact, using both Freud and Lacan, she elaborates that through the experience of "traumatic neurosis," an uncontrollable repetition of the traumatic event takes place in an unconscious effort to understand the otherwise unknowable aspects of the event—like in the case of the burning child where the father's dream of

his child is a repeated encounter with his son's death and the fact that he has seen too late. It is the work of the shamanistic analyst/interpreter to make available the otherwise unknowable, inexpressible elements of the trauma that wound the subject.

Mr. Kapasi's role as the translator of trauma continues throughout the story as he carefully assesses the Das family. He is able to detect the intricate nature of hidden losses that haunt the couple. He continues to observe the more intimate workings of the family as he recognizes signs of a failing marriage similar to his own: "the bickerings, the indifference, the protracted silences" (53).

What becomes "familiar" is the sense of loss that both Mrs. Das and Mr. Kapasi share. For Mrs. Das, Mr. Kapasi's ability to save lives is not limited to the corporeal. Her distress is of both a moral and mental nature. She is the subject of grief, and her hope is that the interpreter will provide the cure through talking, a striking commentary on psychoanalysis and the work of the author and text as an analytic mode of address. A form of transference occurs on the part of Mrs. Das as she finds Mr. Kapasi to be what Lacan describes as the role of the analyst: the *supposed subject of knowledge.* In *Seminar XI* Lacan describes the importance of the analyst being seen as the supposed subject of knowledge in order for transference to occur. As Lacan puts it: "whenever this function may be, for the subject, embodied in some individual . . . transference is established" (Nobus 21–22).

A profound mode of transference, and concurrently counter-transference occurs between Mr. Kapasi and Mrs. Das. For Mrs. Das, transference occurs at the moment she finds his job to be "romantic," as she views him as the "supposed subject of knowing," the shamanistic analyst. Mr. Kapasi's original observations of the failings of the Das's marriage, and his fascination with Mrs. Das's interest in him provoke the counter-transference that "awakens" the failings of his own marriage and life. His feelings for Mrs. Das conjure feelings in him he had lost long ago:

> As his mind raced, Mr. Kapasi experienced a mild and pleasant shock. It was similar to a feeling he used to experience long ago when after months of translating with the aid of a dictionary, he would finally read a passage from a French novel . . . and understand the words . . . In those moments Mr. Kapasi used to believe that all was right in the world, that all struggles were rewarded . . . The promise that he would now hear from Mr. Das now filled him with the same belief. (56)

Mrs. Das awakens a “feeling he used to experience long ago.” This figurative term “awakening” echoes Lacan’s interpretation of the Freudian narrative of the dream of the burning child, whereby there is a “plea by an other who is seen and heard,” and a “command to awaken” (*Unclaimed Experience* 9). Mr. Kapasi, by addressing Mrs. Das’s plea to be seen and heard is awakened to his own unconscious afflictions. He is forced to realize an entire lifetime of losses, “which signaled his failings” (52) as an interpreter. Upon Mrs. Das’s summoning of Mr. Kapasi as the supposed subject of knowledge, he is awakened to a series of losses.

Mr. Kapasi’s job as a translator in a doctor’s office is a sign of not only his failings as an “interpreter between nations,” but also a reminder of a more acute loss, the loss of his son. After his seven-year-old son contracts typhoid, he barters his skills as a translator to pay for the medical bills. His son eventually dies in the mother’s arms, but in order to pay for every additional cost that accrues in his life—the funeral, schooling and tutors for his other children—he continues to work as an interpreter. The loss of his son is compounded by the failing of his marriage, as his wife has “little regard for his career as interpreter” for it “reminded her of a son she’d lost and . . . she resented the other lives he helped” (53). Because of Mrs. Das’s flattery, Mr. Kapasi emerges from a “period of forgetting,” (*Unclaimed Experience* 17) remembering a series of losses, signaling a form of mourning. The death of Mr. Kapasi’s son to typhoid fever awakens Mr. Kapasi—like the father in Freud’s dream of the burning child—to the searing reality of his loss, to the fact that he will forever be a father who lost his son. Mr. Kapasi apprehends the workings of his life as if for the first time. This “awakening” to loss occurs both for Mrs. Das and for Mr. Kapasi. Mrs. Das is able to articulate her pain, which she had previously been incapable of doing.

Mrs. Das tells her secret of infidelity to Mr. Kapasi in a confession, which echoes the workings of an analytic session:

> We married when we were still in college. We were in high school when he proposed. We went to the same college, of course. Back then we couldn’t stand the thought of being separated, not for a day . . . As a result of spending all her time with [him], she continued, [I] did not make many close friends. There was no one [to] confide in about him at the end of a difficult day. (63)

She continues her story as she would in any therapeutic session and confesses the details of her infidelity and the truth of her son Bobbie’s real

father. As she tells Mr. Kapasi her secret, one she has kept for eight years, her desire for Mr. Kapasi to be an interpreter of her maladies is unveiled. When Mr. Kapasi asks her why she has told him her secret, she turns to him and says:

> I told you because of your talents . . . Don't you realize what it means for me to tell you? It means I'm tired of feeling so terrible all the time. Eight years, Mr. Kapasi, I've been in pain eight years. I was hoping you could help me feel better, say the right thing. Suggest some kind of remedy. (65)

In a strange echo of the son in Freud's dream, Mrs. Das addresses Mr. Kapasi with her own "don't you see I'm burning," laying bare her burning secret and imploring him to not just *see* her suffering, but to *do* something about it, to *wake up* to it. The "suggestion of a remedy" may not be what Mr. Kapasi can provide for the like of Mrs. Das, but he is able to "give words to . . . pain" (66), allowing Mrs. Das to articulate her secret. What is crucial between Mrs. Das and Mr. Kapasi is how each of the characters has been transformed through their interactions. Mrs. Das rejects Mr. Kapasi when he suggests that perhaps what she feels is guilt rather than pain. Although he fails to "interpret" her maladies in the way she wishes, a more significant exchange has already occurred. The mode of address they make toward one another acts as analytic framework to "awakens" each to their losses. The ethical burden of the work of the interpreter, and I would also argue of the author, is a transmission of knowledge of a series of losses. In this way both interpreter and author reveal the intersection between literature and psychoanalysis, and locate that intersection at the very fault line of the South Asian experience both on the Subcontinent (Mr. Kapasi) and in the United States (Mrs. Das).

The awakening is not just limited to the psyche of our protagonist Mr. Kapasi. By the end of the story we also find a transformation at work in Mrs. Das. Even though Mrs. Das rejects Mr. Kapasi, his ability to give words to her pain transforms her interactions with her children. In the beginning of the story we find Mrs. Das to be a distant mother, more concerned with her appearance than the happenings of her children: [Mrs. Das's] daughter "began to play with the lock on her side, clicking it with some effort backward and forward, but Mrs. Das did nothing to stop her. [Mrs. Das] sat a bit slouched at one end of the back seat, not offering her puffed rice to anyone" (47).

In this description of Mrs. Das her daughter is engaging in what could be characterized as a dangerous activity for a child, clicking the lock of a car door. However, Mrs. Das does not seem to care. Mrs. Das's disinterest in her surroundings is highlighted by her "not offering her puffed rice to anyone." This indifference is in marked contrast to the end of the story where her illegitimate child, Bobbie, whose illegitimacy she has just confessed to Mr. Kapasi, is in danger. A group of monkeys attack Bobbie because the puffed rice Mrs. Das refused to share with her family falls to the ground forming a path that follows Mrs. Das as she walks toward her family. As a result, hungry monkeys track the trail and her son:

> surrounded by a group of monkeys, over a dozen of them, pulling at his T-shirt with their long black fingers. The puffed rice Mrs. Das had spilled was scattered at his feet, raked over by the monkeys' hands. The boy was silent, his body frozen, swift tears running down his startled face. (67–68)

As Mrs. Das encounters her endangered son, she once again pleads for Mr. Kapasi's help. This plea is not an analytic one, and yet still another plea for help: "Mr. Kapasi," Mrs. Das shrieked, noticing him standing to the side. "Do something, for God's sake, do something!" (68). Mrs. Das's plea demonstrates that she has at least momentarily been transformed and her disinterest toward her children has become one of interest, a radical revision of her earlier relationship to her children's safety and an awakened interest in her motherhood.

I argue that Lahiri's *Interpreter* does the work of passing on an awakening of loss to others, as an ethical burden of survival. With this understanding of the work of interpretation in mind, I ask the following question: Why does a writer so far removed from the events of Partition feel compelled to dedicate two of her stories to the effects of this devastating event in South Asian history? Lahiri does this because as an interpreter of maladies, her ethical burden is to awaken others to this event. Within the narrative, this awakening transforms both Mrs. Das and Mr. Kapasi. As both Caruth and Lacan suggest, the awakening comes in the form of repetition. The work of repetition passes on narratives no longer mastered by the one who writes them, as in the case of the author who circulates his/her work. As Lacan suggests, "the passing of psychoanalytic theory is an imperative that turns between traumatic repetition and the ethical burden of survival" (*Unclaimed Experience* 107–108).

If South Asian English literature is riddled with the "traumatic repetition" of the Partition, Lahiri's *Interpreter of Maladies* serves as a direct reference to the ethical burden of survival. Lahiri's role as an interpreter is to be one who enables mourning and "give words to pain." These words, rather than serving as a translation—a more precise rendering—emerge in the messier tangle that is interpretation. If, as Elaine Scarry has suggested, pain destroys the world that language calls up, then Lahiri implies that the task of interpreting this pain falls on the individual who lives as one removed from the trauma. As Scarry observes in *The Body in Pain*: "Because the person in pain is so ordinarily bereft of the resources of speech, it is not surprising that the language for pain should sometimes be brought into being by those who are not themselves in pain but who can speak *on behalf* of those who are" (6). The stories in *Interpreter of Maladies* can thus be understood as speaking on behalf of each other, each narrative of pain giving voice to the latent suffering in another story, and the combined force of these voices speaking on behalf of the maladies that shape the broader, contemporary South Asian experience. These voices, I propose, awaken its subjects belatedly.

## THE ASIAN AMERICAN DIASPORIC JUNCTURE

Awakening to loss quite literally happens to young Lilia in the story "When Mr. Pirzada Came to Dine." When Mr. Pirzada comes to Lilia's home for a meal, she finds out the difference between Bengali Muslims like Mr. Pirzada and Hindus like her own family. It is a difference that she is both startled and confused by. Lilia calls Mr. Pirzada the "Indian man" and her father responds by saying, "Mr. Pirzada is no longer considered Indian . . . Not since Partition. Our country was divided in 1947" (25). The year 1947 is only known to Lilia as the year of India's independence:

> When I said I thought that was the date of India's independence from Britain, my father said. "That too. One moment we were free and then we were sliced up," he explained, drawing an X with his finger on the countertop, "like a pie. Hindus here, Muslims there. Dacca no longer belongs to us." He told me that during Partition Hindus and Muslims had set fire to each other's homes. For many, the idea of eating in the other's company was still unthinkable. (25)

Lilia is aware of the freedom India receives from Britain and the import this has in terms of European history, but is ignorant of the repercussions of a

“freedom” called Partition. Her father is confused by his daughter’s lack of knowledge of one of the world’s most devastating moments in history. He goes so far as to lead her to a map to try and show her the difference between India and Pakistan in purely cartographic terms. Her father inquires as to the education she is receiving: “What exactly do they teach you at school? Do you study history? Geography? You are aware of course of East Pakistan’s fight for independence?” (26). In this interaction, the role of father and child is inverted from that in the Freudian dream. Lilia is given stories of a trauma second-hand from her father as he says to her: “Don’t you know? India on the day of its independence and since has been burning.” Rehearsing the son’s question—“Father, don’t you see I’m burning,” Lilia’s father presses her to see the story of India’s suffering. She sees this burning too late, but must nonetheless be awakened by its light and heat, as it reconstitutes her identity and it opens her to her own history.

Lilia’s sudden realization of the supposedly radical difference between Hindus and Muslims, the difference between herself and Mr. Pirzada, compels her to explore the history of India and Pakistan. As Mr. Pirzada comes over nightly and he and her parents watch the television to follow the fate of East Pakistan, which fought for independence from West Pakistan on the basis of ethnic, linguistic, and political difference in the civil war of 1971 resulting in the birth of Bangladesh. Lilia begins to realize the existence of the “world next door” (Srikanth) as she is introduced to a history that was otherwise unavailable to her.

Lahiri’s collection must be read as a whole as each story relays a malady that is the effect of history on the South Asian diasporic subject. In the collection the trauma of the loss of a child, the infidelity of a wife, the loss of home and the burning of India during Partition are all interrelated. Lahiri’s *Interpreter*, and the title story in particular, illuminate the importance of literature to the field of postcolonial criticism. My reading is a model for the way in which literary studies adds to the field of postcolonial studies. South Asian diasporic literature and literary studies both do the work that history and political theory cannot. Partition historian David Gilmartin writes that “fiction has . . . proved a far more powerful vehicle [than history] for describing the influence of Partition on the common man and woman” (1069). And, as I examine in my work, literature, unlike history, political theory, and anthropology, has the ability

to both transform and to perform the work of cultural awakening. By reading South Asian Anglophone literature as it translates the traumatic events of Partition we may begin to comprehend the world after, as Veena Das writes, it has been "made strange through the desolating experience of violence and loss," and even perhaps imagine new futures. Lahiri assembles the emotional mappings of the belatedness of trauma, told second-hand to her and then to us, as she is fundamentally aware the she must live and survive to tell and retell the stories of burning. What Lahiri provides is Marguerite Duras' eloquent description of the relationship between text and reader, "they weep and grieve together" (107).

## NOTES

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2. Jhumpa Lahiri, quoted in Dhingra Shankar, "Not Too Spicy."

3. Renée Descartes infamous proclamation on existence, "I think therefore I am."

4. Lahiri, Jhumpa. 2000. "My Intimate Alien." *Outlook* (New Delhi), special annual issue on "Stree" [Woman].

5. This is by no means an exhaustive list.

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*Part Three*

# Gendered Ruptures and Familial Belongings

## *Chapter 7*

# Feminizing Men?

## *Moving Beyond Asian American Literary Gender Wars in Jhumpa Lahiri's Fiction*

Lavina Dhingra, Bates College

Nearly two decades ago, Elaine Kim had declared men and women in Asian American literature as "such opposite creatures." Arguably there exists an unspoken Asian American literary paradigm that has foregrounded the formation of the field itself. The gender wars that Frank Chin and Maxine Hong Kingston ignited since the publication of Kingston's memoir *The Woman Warrior* in 1976 have raged through the present, especially among Chinese American literary scholars such as King-Kok Cheung, Sau-ling Wong, Jinqi Ling, David Leiwei Li, and Wenxin Li.

No similar gender war has transpired among South Asian American writers or scholars. As Rajini Srikanth and I observed in *A Part, Yet Apart: South Asians in Asian America*, immigrant writers from the Indian subcontinent, with the exception of Bharati Mukherjee, had not been studied under the rubric of Asian American literature until 1998. Even the renowned blind journalist, memoirist, and essayist Ved Mehta, who has lived in the United States since the 1950s and had published over twenty books by the turn of the century, did not show up on the radar screen of Asian American literary scholars. Nevertheless, Bharati Mukherjee's fiction in the 1980s, which followed the earlier Asian American paradigm of representing gender oppression attracted much praise from mainstream readers and critics, and much blame from both male and female South Asian American scholars, partly due to her negative representations of

Asian men and the repressiveness of Indian and Indian American society, which were often simplistically contrasted with the liberation promised by the United States.[1]

In sharp contrast, in her Pulitzer Prize-winning short story collection *Interpreter of Maladies* (1999), the UK-born and Bengali American-raised Jhumpa Lahiri evokes new definitions of masculinity, and moves away from its stereotypical portrayals in earlier Asian immigrant women's writings. This chapter analyzes Lahiri's representation of Bengali American male characters, and demonstrates how Lahiri's work transcends and challenges the Asian American "gender troubles" paradigm that earlier "Woman Warrior"-like Bengali American writers such as Bharati Mukherjee and Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni modeled throughout the 1980s and 1990s.

This chapter raises larger questions for further contemplation such as: What does it mean for a new generation of ethnic female writers to primarily depict male protagonists and to evoke empathy for men, or to provide a male point of view, when the field of Asian American literature was itself born out of gender wars that aligned Asian American women writers, readers, and critics with the white feminist struggles of the 1970s and 1980s? Does Lahiri's work suggest that a gender balance is now possible in fiction because greater gender equity or at least gender-bending has been achieved within twenty-first century American society? What, then, is at stake for immigrant writers, for readers of all genders and ethnicities, as well as for Asian American scholars, who focus on male protagonists and narrators, when in a largely feminized field, it is still mostly women reading, teaching, and conducting scholarship on ethnic women's writings?

To King-Kok Cheung's question about the ethnic female writer's dilemma, "The Woman Warrior versus The Chinaman Pacific: Must a Chinese American Critic Choose between Feminism and Heroism?" (1990), Jhumpa Lahiri's fiction answers that an Asian American woman does not have to choose between her Asian-ness or her femaleness but can negotiate both. Lahiri also proves that she does not have to write and represent only what she is biologically determined to be—a woman writing by, about, and for women. An examination of the Asian American gender debates in the late twentieth-century United States and in colonial nineteenth-century Bengal

will help illustrate the complexities of Jhumpa Lahiri's nuanced fictional representations of Bengali American masculinity.

## THE WORD WARRIOR WOMEN

As early as 1993, Shirley Lim described Asian American literature as "an active site of masculinist views and feminist resistance" ("Feminist" 572). For Elaine Kim, women in Asian American men's writings were "defined only in relation to men, often as voiceless obstacles to or objects of their search for America" ("Such Opposite" 73). In sharp contrast, in Asian American women's literature, "it is women characters who strive, and sometimes they win. Their heroic reconstruction is accomplished without or despite the men." The male characters serve in marginal roles "except insofar as they obstruct the pursuit of a self-determined identity for the women" thus allowing the female writers to align themselves with other feminists due to their "examination of female self and subjectivity" (70). Within the last two decades, several South Asian American women writers have also produced literary texts that partly fit into Shirley Geok-lin Lim's definition of the "common trajectories" in Asian American literature, including "family, home, community, origin, loss, dislocation, relocation, racial differences, cross-cultural resistance, second-generation Americanization and assimilation, identity destabilization and reformulation, as in many other American ethnic texts" ("Immigration and Diaspora" 292). Among the most important and recurring themes, however, that South Asian American women's literature addresses, and for which it was included in the earliest Asian American women's anthologies, is Asian women's gender oppression within both the Asian and the North American contexts. Similarly, most South Asian American women have largely followed the earlier Asian American models representing gender oppression by primarily representing female protagonists and feminist points of view since Mukherjee's novel *Wife* was published in 1975.

And yet, in contrast to what I term the Asian American Word Warrior Women, South Asian American writers and critics have not been embroiled in gender wars like the earlier Chinese American male and female writers who, in turn, have largely divided the male and female literary critics on the two sides of the debate. With Lahiri's inclusion into the illustrious ranks of

American male writers who have won the Pulitzer such as William Faulkner, John Updike, and Saul Bellow, among others, South Asian Americans have also crossed into an all-American—as opposed to an ethnic minority—world, the latter having been often posited as separated from the "real" American.

## "EFFEMINATE" ASIAN AMERICAN MEN AND "RACIST LOVE"

South Asian American writers, whether male or female, have never faced the same constraints that Frank Chin describes with regard to earlier Asian American writers who are "treated as a quack, a witch doctor, a bughouse prophet, an entertaining fellow, dancing the heebie-jeebies in the street for dimes" (1974 xxxvi). In their "Introduction" to *Aiiieeeee! An Anthology of Asian American Writings*, Frank Chin et al. blamed the emasculated images of Asian males in American society on their stereotypical representations by Chinese American women writers who, according to Chin, were appeasing white audiences:

> The white stereotype of the acceptable and unacceptable Asian is utterly without manhood. Good or bad, the stereotypical Asian is nothing as a man. At worst, the Asian-American is contemptible because he is womanly, effeminate, devoid of all the traditionally masculine qualities of originality, daring, physical courage, and creativity. The mere fact that four out of five American-born Chinese-American writers are women reinforces this aspect of the stereotype, as does the fact that four of these writers, the four autobiographers, completely submerge and all but eradicate all traces of their characters in their books. (Chin 1974 xxx)

Frank Chin and Jeffrey Paul Chan, whose essay "Racist Love" (1972) expresses their desperation to earn respect for Asian masculinity within the American literary context, thus, conflictedly emphasized the characteristics of manhood as "aggressiveness, creativity, individuality, just being taken seriously" ("Racist Love" 68, qtd. in Wenxin Li *Gender Negotiations* 111).[2]

Not surprisingly then as David Leiwei Li cogently states, Frank Chin et al.'s *Aiiieeeee!* has a "notable masculine tone," a "necessary over-compensation and an uncritical reception of dominant cultural values on universality and masculinity" (44). He notes that despite Chin et al.'s angry and rebellious, stereotypically masculine and aggressive stance, their work did not receive audiences beyond "basement classrooms or dingy ethnic enclaves" (44) until the appearance of Maxine Hong Kingston's autobiographical text *The Woman Warrior*, which unapologetically and

unequivocally privileged the Chinese American female "I." Ironically, then, in focusing on the gender-oppressed Asian female subject, the women writers brought their aggressive male critics to the limelight, too.

Unlike earlier Asian American literary texts focused on differentiating the Asian from the American, Kingston's personal story focused "critical consensus on formal excellence" while benefiting from the "rise of literary feminism as both legitimate and legitimating critical practice." Thus, an Asian American text was "embraced as a work of art in the dominant national culture, and its achieved transcendence of racial boundaries on the shared category of gender has produced a heterogeneous readership beyond ethnicity" (David Li 45). Kingston's work, which attracted feminist readers, thus opened up the "racially exclusive terrain of nationalistic resistance" to Asians and non-Asians, whose "interest and investment were, however, primarily literary" (45).

Li's analysis of the feminist literary reception of Kingston's work is helpful in illustrating the transnational literati's embrace of Lahiri's fiction nearly three decades later. Due to the increased numbers of female and feminist readers, writers, students, and scholars, through the late-1970s, 1980s and 1990s, Maxine Hong Kingston's work reached far beyond Chinese American audiences by focusing on gender struggles. In contrast, Jhumpa Lahiri has reached beyond Bengali American audiences by *widening* rather than narrowing her scope *beyond gender*. Lahiri has brought multiple readers—male and female, Bengali and non-Bengali Indians, South Asians and non-South Asians—to South Asian American literature. Lahiri has thus allowed Asian American literature to be considered American literature, as is evident most recently by her inclusion in the 2009 *Heath Anthology of American Literature*, and also as world literature as seen by the publication of her 2008 short story collection *Unaccustomed Earth* concurrently in several European languages.[3] Simultaneously, among Indian intellectual elite circles, Lahiri is claimed as a "Bengali" daughter of Calcutta.[4]

Unlike previous Asian North American women writers—including Maxine Hong Kingston, Joy Kogawa, and Hisaye Yamamoto, who focus primarily on female protagonists—Jhumpa Lahiri is unusual in her portrayal of Asian American masculinity. And unlike other South Asian American women writers—such as Bharati Mukherjee, Chitra Divakaruni,

and Ginu Kamani, for example—who have followed Kingston's example to depict the Asian feminist "Woman Warrior" syndrome, and protest gender oppression and repressive arranged marriages in texts such as *Wife*, *Middleman and Other Stories*, *Jasmine*, *Arranged Marriage*, *The Mistress of Spices*, and *Junglee Girl* respectively, Jhumpa Lahiri moves beyond the identity politics of gender and does not focus solely on either the female protagonist or the female reader.

Lahiri is thus unusual among South Asian American women writers as she primarily depicts a wide range of male protagonists. In her debut collection, to represent Bengali and Bengali American masculinity in stories such as "Interpreter of Maladies," "The Third and Final Continent," and "A Temporary Matter," Lahiri focuses largely on the male characters' point of view. Thus, she evokes even the female reader's empathy mostly for her male protagonists. They include Mr. Kapasi, the Indian tour guide and medical translator in "Interpreter of Maladies"; Shukumar, the thirty-five-year-old, Indian American doctoral student and homemaker in "A Temporary Matter"; the financially successful second-generation Indian American computer engineer Sanjeev in "This Blessed House"; the unnamed first-person narrator-protagonist in "The Third and Final Continent," the MIT librarian, modeled on Lahiri's own father, who arrives in Boston via London in 1969; and Lahiri's most well-rounded characters Ashoke and Gogol Ganguli in her novel, *The Namesake*.

In her latest collection *Unaccustomed Earth* (2008), the title story evokes readers' empathy for the retired, widower father visiting the thirty-eight-year-old female protagonist Ruma rather than for Ruma or her dead mother. Initially it seems as though the story is being largely told from Ruma's perspective, and the male protagonist is nameless except relationally: he is called "Baba," "Ruma's father," "her father," or "Dadu" (i.e., grandfather to Ruma's three-year-old son, Akash). Nevertheless, the story turns out to be as much about Baba's growth and development—as a supportive, feminist father encouraging his lawyer daughter to not sacrifice her career for motherhood; a nurturing grandfather acting as a temporary surrogate father for Akash as he shares his joy of gardening, teaches him the Bengali language, and reads him Dr. Seuss at bedtime; the energetic world traveler sending his daughter postcards from Europe; the emotionally-spent, traditional Bengali husband-turned-widower just discovering a romantic

companionate love relationship; the animated seventy-year-old travel companion and lover of the Bengali-American professor, Mrs. Bagchi; and an independent aging man averting domesticity, family ties, and rootedness. In “A Choice of Accommodations” we see the story entirely from the male perspective of Amit Sarkar who revisits, for an ex-girlfriend’s wedding, the prep school in Massachusetts where he had been unhappy as the only Indian student, but where, after a drunken night, he tries to resolve some of his inner conflicts regarding his less than successful past love life and emotionally stale and spent current marriage.

Even in those short stories where the protagonist is female, Lahiri’s male characters play a critical role to influence the action and the point of view. This occurs in “Mrs. Sen’s,” where we see the lonely, childless housewife’s poignant yet humorous actions from the perspective of the ten-year-old “American” boy Eliot whom Mrs. Sen babysits, and with whose life the story begins and ends. In “Sexy,” Miranda’s conscience is pricked by the seven-year-old Indian boy Rohin whom she babysits because he claims his father has left his mother for a “sexy” stranger. Rohin’s perspective ultimately makes Miranda end her adulterous affair with the Bengali investment banker Devajit Mitra. Although “Only Goodness” is told from the sister Sudha’s perspective, the story is really about her alcoholic brother, Rahul. The narrative evokes the reader’s empathy for the misunderstood, misfit, alcoholic, Cornell-dropout whom the over-achieving, model minority immigrant family cannot accept or help because he is a failure according to their hypocritical, socially conscious standards.

In response to a question about why she writes frequently from the male point of view, Lahiri explains in an interview:

> In the beginning I think it was mainly curiosity. I have no brothers, and growing up, men generally seemed like mysterious creatures to me. Except for an early story I wrote in college, the first thing I wrote from the male point of view was the story “This Blessed House,” in *Interpreter of Maladies*. It was an exhilarating and liberating thing to do, so much so that I wrote three stories in a row, all from the male perspective. It’s a challenge, as well. I always have to ask myself, would a man think this? Do this? I always knew that the protagonist of *The Namesake* would be a boy. (“Jhumpa Lahiri on Her Debut Novel” hinduism.about.com/library/weekly/extra/bl-jhumpainterview.htm; accessed March 8, 2008)

Although I have elsewhere compared Jhumpa Lahiri with her fellow Bengali American writer, Chitra Divakaruni for providing a “not too spicy”

version of Indian culture for American audiences (“Not Too Spicy”), Lahiri provides nuanced and sensitive depictions of Bengali American male characters who are amiable, intellectual, caring, sensitive, thoughtful, often nurturing, and certainly not villainous. Lahiri’s depiction of men is unlike Divakaruni’s, whose Bengali or Indian American male characters are often portrayed one dimensionally as repressive and oppressive agents who physically, emotionally, or verbally abuse their female victims (as in *Arranged Marriage*, *Mistress of Spices*, or *Sister of My Heart*). Unlike Divakaruni, Lahiri usually evokes the reader’s empathy for most of her male characters and is often less sympathetic and more satirical of the females. For instance, in “Unaccustomed Earth,” Ruma is depicted in a burgeoning identity crisis, dissatisfied with her middling, middle-aged, economically affluent but emotionally and spiritually empty life, and as unable or unwilling to change it, or to support and nurture either her husband, son, or father. She is internally conflicted and alienated regarding her cultural investment as a Bengali daughter and mother and her disregarded ambition as a lawyer turned stuck-at-home, frustrated, exhausted wife, and pregnant mother (43). Her emotional stagnation and unrootedness do not evoke the reader’s empathy because, unlike her seventy-year-old father, she is neither able to develop new roots nor able to adapt to her Bengali or American life models. In contrast, both her husband and father are depicted as sensitive to her needs and aspirations as they attempt to support her through her personal and professional choices and identity crises.

At the start of the twenty-first century, perhaps, the timing has been right for Jhumpa Lahiri to renegotiate (Asian) American sexual politics. In the subtitle of her much-cited essay rejecting the gender wars, King-Kok Cheung asked pointedly a decade earlier, “Must a Chinese American Critic Choose Between Feminism and Heroism?” Expressing dissatisfaction with such ethnic nationalist and feminist dichotomies, she urged that “the time has come to look at men and women together” (245–56). Furthermore, Cheung believes that Asian American women should “find a way to negotiate the tangle of sexual and racial politics in all its intricacies, not just out of a desire for ‘revenge’ but also out of a sense of ‘loyalty’” (246; qtd. in Wenxin Li 123–24). Lahiri, thus, seems to take King-Kok Cheung’s advice to transcend Asian American literary gender troubles and displays a

somewhat nuanced nationalistic loyalty towards her male protagonists rather than a simplistic feminist revenge. In his essay “Sui Sin Far and the Chinese American Canon: Toward a Post-Gender-Wars Discourse” (2004), Wenxin Li praises Sui Sin Far for going “beyond the simple reversal of power relations within the family as well as the rigid dichotomy of men versus women.” The nineteenth-century biracial Chinese American writer is credited with having altered the stereotypical representations of the Chinese male as “crude, unfeeling, and morally corrupt” into those of men displaying “compassion and integrity” (127). Even though she is writing a century later, Jhumpa Lahiri represents Asian American masculinity in a manner more in line with Sui Sin Far than Maxine Hong Kingston. Perhaps, like her nineteenth-century predecessor who appealed to male and female readers across ethnic and racial boundaries, Lahiri depicts Asian men as neither overtly aggressive nor egotistically fragile, but rather as well-rounded, human, emotionally vulnerable, and usually humane.

## “FRAGILE” ASIAN MEN AND “RACIST LOVE”

Jhumpa Lahiri’s representation of masculinity does not, however, concur with contemporary South Asian scholarship on gender. In their introduction to *South Asian Masculinities: Contexts of Change, Sites of Continuity* (2004), editors Caroline Osella, Fillippo Osella, and Radhika Chopra discuss all males and (and implicitly South Asian men) as “especially fragile persons who nonetheless insist upon especially powerful personae.” They lament “the common phenomenon of men using women in order to prop up and extend their masculine selves,” so that women are viewed as “examples of men’s self-extensions” (14; original italics). It is significant that Jhumpa Lahiri’s male and female characters do not exhibit these traits. Although some male characters could be viewed as emotionally vulnerable, they are not particularly “fragile” in the sense of having fragile or misogynistic egos that need to be buffered and overcompensated by “especially powerful personae,” or with Chin et al.’s “aggressiveness” just to be “taken seriously.” In fact, quite the opposite, they are portrayed as more nurturing, giving, and forgiving than the several self-absorbed, childishly selfish, or somewhat egoistical second-generation Indian American female characters such as Shoba in “A Temporary Matter,”

Twinkle in “This Blessed House,” Mrs. Das in “Interpreter of Maladies”; or the spiritually rootless, emotionally lost, culturally alienated, and geographically dislocated, second-generation Bengali American females like Ruma (“Unaccustomed Earth”), Sudha (“Only Goodness”), and Hema (“Going Ashore”), in the collection *Unaccustomed Earth*.

Nor do Jhumpa Lahiri’s male protagonists display the extremely negative, so-called emasculated characteristics that Frank Chin homophobically denounced in 1991 as the fate of Chinese American men who, when viewed by mainstream American society, “at their best, are effeminate closet queens like Charlie Chan and, at their worst, are homosexual menaces like Fu Manchu” (Chin et al., *The Big Aiiieeeee!* 1991, xiii). The blatant sexism and homophobia embedded in Chin’s comments is, of course, disturbing and has been much castigated by Asian American scholars beyond gender and generational lines. In contrast to the marginalized images of Asian American men that Chin provides, most of Lahiri’s male characters play the hetero-normative roles of husbands, fathers, and married sons. Simultaneously Lahiri’s fiction asks readers to consider the value of feminizing heterosexual men, so to speak, and to avoid strict hierarchical gender roles.

## RACIST COLONIAL LOVE AND EFFETE MALE CIPHERS

Notwithstanding Jhumpa Lahiri’s departure from Frank Chin’s portrayals, there are significant overlaps between Chin’s critique of the emasculation of Asian men within twentieth-century Anglo-American society and nineteenth-century British representations of effete Bengali males. It is useful here to examine historical research on the construction of colonial masculinity during the British rule of India in the nineteenth century where the Bengali gentleman or *bhadralok* (“elite or respectable” male) was considered effeminate in contrast to the “manly” Englishman (Sinha, *Colonial Masculinity* 448). The lenses of postcolonial theory help situate the Indian male immigrant’s literary representation within a twenty-first-century American context. The feminized Asian American in contrast to the hyper-masculinized African American male in U.S. contexts parallels the “effeminate” Bengali male posited against the aggressive and

hypersexualized “manly” North Indian Punjabi or “virile” Muslim males whom the British stereotyped (Sinha 447).[5]

There exists substantial research on the construction of colonial masculinity by the British rulers in nineteenth-century India in terms that, although dealing with different contexts, follow Frantz Fanon’s *Black Skin White Masks* (1968) and Edward Said’s *Orientalism* (1978). Osella, Osella and Chopra cite T. Luhrmann’s study of the Parsi which described the binary constructions of British and Indian masculinity: “The British were hypermasculinized, scientific and progressive, a high step on the evolutionary ladder; the Indians were effeminate, childlike, primitive, and superstitious” and that “the colonizer is insecure, seeks to dominate to reassure himself, conceptualizes the colonized as feminine” (qtd. in C. Osella, F. Osella, and Chopra 3–4).

The colonialist’s insecurity becomes quite evident as Thomas Babington Macaulay, the nineteenth-century British colonial administrator and reformer, wrote in particularly disparaging terms about the Bengalis of eastern India:

> the physical organization of the Bengali is feeble even to effeminacy. [ . . . ] His pursuits are sedentary, his limbs delicate, his movements languid. During many ages he has been trampled upon by men of bolder and more hardy breeds. [ . . . ] His mind bears a singular analogy to his body. It is weak even to helplessness for purposes of manly resistance. (566–7; qtd. in Sen 49)

As anthropologist Joseph S. Alter observes in his essay on the physical fitness regimes in colonial India, in nineteenth-century England, and the United States, the so-called “muscular Christianity” was intertwined with colonialism and race, and arose out of “broad-based crisis of masculinity reflected in ideas about sex and sexuality in general and homosexuality in particular” (502).

Macaulay’s demeaning descriptions about the physically weakened Bengali male recall Frank Chin’s homophobic understanding of “racist love” to refer to the depictions of Asian male characters in Chinese American women’s writings as emasculated. Elaine Kim states in a late-twentieth century U.S. context, “Asian men have been coded as having no sexuality, while Asian women have nothing else. [ . . . ] Both exist to define the white man’s virility” (“Such Opposite” 69). Trying to negotiate between the Chinese American male and female writers and scholars, King-Kok

Cheung's essay "Of Men and Men" claims that "the most popular books and films by Asian Americans have one element in common: the marginalization of Asian American men" (176). Although Cheung understands the writers' need to "expose and combat sexism," she cautions Asian American writers to "guard against internalizing and reproducing racial stereotypes, thereby reinforcing deep-seated biases of the American reading and viewing public" (176).

The study of Asian masculinity thus reveals that it is not just women but men who have been represented stereotypically whether in colonial South Asia or late-twentieth-century North America. As C. Osella, F. Osella, and Chopra note, "Compared to the multiplicities of femininity in South Asian studies, men emerge in a lesser and often two-dimensional range. Commonly they are householders; sometimes priests or renouncers; workers—be they landlord-farmers or landless labourers; patrons or clients; and almost always 'patriarchs.' Too often men become mere ciphers [ . . . ]" (2). The use of the negative label "ciphers" to signify men is noteworthy since the term usually refers to women made invisible within patriarchal structures, as in Elaine Showalter's description of British and Anglo-American women writers, and in the title of Ginu Kamani's lead story in her 1995 collection *Junglee Girl*. In the latter, the Indian, Indo-British, and Indian American male characters are flat, one-dimensional, and unilaterally portrayed as patriarchs and sexual predators.

In contrast, Jhumpa Lahiri's male characters seem like neither ciphers, nor traditional, oppressive patriarchs. Hence, her writing appeals to both male and female readers. Lahiri's narrator provides insightful details into the minds and hearts of men, and represents multi-dimensional characters, viewed in multiple settings, displaying differentiated emotional reactions in varied circumstances. For instance, in "A Temporary Matter," Lahiri portrays how Shukumar, the doctoral student of Indian history, is not willing to have his intellectual life subsumed by the trendy postcolonial theory-talk of his peers. Attending a Bengali poets' reading in Cambridge, Massachusetts, Shukumar feels like an outsider among intellectually snobbish academics. He "was soon bored; he was unable to decipher the literary diction, and couldn't join the rest of the audience as they sighed and nodded solemnly after certain phrases. Peering at the newspaper folded in his lap, he studied the temperatures of cities around the world" (13). Lahiri

gently satirizes the Bengali American crowd's intellectual posturing and reveals that her protagonist is not the conventional Bengali intellectual male blindly nodding with the crowd to conform to stereotypical cultural or gender roles.

## MARKERS OF MASCULINITY? EDUCATION, CLASS, PROFESSIONAL SUCCESS, AND WEALTH

In a different kind of study of masculinity in colonial India, Mrinalini Sinha (1999) rightly notes that masculinity "traverses multiple axes of race, caste, class, sexuality, religion, and ethnicity. Masculinity, that is to say, cannot be confined solely within its 'proper' domain of male-female relations" ("History" 446). Unlike the weakened and socially disempowered representations of Asian American males critiqued by Frank Chin et al., most of Jhumpa Lahiri's male characters are intellectual, highly-educated, and usually professionally and financially successful. Hence, they represent the professional elite class that many of post-1965 South Asian male immigrants constitute.[6] Although they may not be politically very visible or vocal, they are neither economically nor intellectually marginalized within American society. They are thus differently positioned from the Bengali-speaking South Asian immigrants in England who are usually Bangladeshi restaurant waiters, small convenience store-owners, and other economically, linguistically (non-English speaking or with limited linguistic facility), religiously (as Muslims), and socially, marginalized groups, representing a lower socio-economic class. In sharp contrast, the Bengalis in the United States are largely Indians from West Bengal and, arguably, among the most highly educated and professionally successful of all the ethnic sub-groups of South Asian Americans.

Thus, the majority of immigrant male characters in South Asian American women's texts including Jhumpa Lahiri's fiction present a very different, academically and socio-economically, privileged version of masculinity than that viewed in earlier Chinese American women's writings. For instance, Ashoke Ganguli, in Lahiri's novel *The Namesake* is extremely well-read and knowledgeable about Russian literary classics including the works of Nikolai Gogol, his son's namesake. Ashoke becomes a tenured professor at a (presumably elite) liberal arts college in Massachusetts and,

as the sole breadwinner, provides his immigrant family with a comfortable life in American suburbia affording frequent trips abroad to visit their families in India. The American-born son Gogol (Nikhil) attends elite east coast academic institutions (Yale and Columbia) and enjoys an affluent lifestyle as an architect in New York City, notwithstanding his middle-class parents' concerns that he doesn't make "enough money." The narrator in "The Third and Final Continent" is a librarian at MIT whose son attends Harvard. Mr. Sen in "Mrs. Sen's" is a tenure-track mathematics professor in a well-respected Boston-area college. Devajit Mitra in "Sexy" is an affluent investment banker living a yuppie life in Boston; and Sanjeev in "This Blessed House," an engineer from MIT, is a model of professional success, and likely to become vice president: "At thirty-three he had a secretary of his own and a dozen people working under his supervision" (138). With "an excessively generous income for a single man" (143), Sanjeev has expensive tastes and buys a lavish house. The retired father in "Unaccustomed Earth" is an affluent world traveler; Kaushik in "Going Ashore" is an internationally renowned photographer for news journals including *The New York Times* (305). Several characters are associated with elite U.S. academic institutions including MIT and Harvard ("Third and Final Continent," "Hell-Heaven"). Even those characters who don't have large incomes possess the cultural capital of higher education: for instance, the least economically affluent character, Mr. Kapasi, the Indian tour guide in "Interpreter of Maladies" speaks several languages and translates medical terminology; and while he struggles with depression at the loss of their child, Shukumar, in "A Temporary Matter," is a doctoral student in Boston. Most of the male characters thus exhibit the markers of academic and professional success that traditionally allow access to masculine power and privilege.

Not surprisingly, then, Jhumpa Lahiri's first- and second-generation Bengali male characters assimilate into mainstream American society in ways that would have been entirely impossible for the Chinese American males whom Maxine Hong Kingston renders invisible in *The Woman Warrior*—precisely because, as owners of laundromats and gambling houses, they *were* invisible in American society. Lahiri's male protagonists are, perhaps, closer to the academically proficient and upwardly mobile, middle-class, Chinese American males in Gish Jen's 1991 novel *Typical*

*American*—the entrepreneur Grover, the tenured science professor Henry Chao, and Ralph Chang, who relinquishes tenure at a reputed college to buy a fried chicken fast food joint. Gish Jen satirizes both first- and second-generation Chinese American males as they blindly aspire to become the eponymous "Typical American" and, hence, abandon their implicitly more wholesome, family-based Asian values and identity for a blind and corrupted following of the false American Dream pursuing either illicit wealth or adulterous sex. However, in her usual style—which I have elsewhere termed—as a "cultural translator" ("Not Too Spicy"), Lahiri uses gentle irony instead of harsh satire. Thus she is not critical of her Indian American male characters—even when Dev, in the story "Sexy," has an affair with the twenty-two-year-old stranger Miranda while his wife visits India; or when Sanjeev in "This Blessed House," suffers in silence even though he is quietly exasperated at his wife's Christian leanings as she flamboyantly displays Madonna statues throughout their home, Lahiri's satire is gentle, and rather than depicting the immigrant male as emasculated, she portrays him as generous and emancipated in allowing his wife more freedom and power than may have been expected in a traditional Indian household.

As Elaine Kim observes, Asian American discourse displays "tensions" between ethnic nationalism and feminism that are "rooted in social realities" ("Such Opposite" 73). Jhumpa Lahiri subverts stereotypical gender roles as she portrays her male and female characters' behavior in unexpected and atypical ways but as, perhaps, rooted in late-twentieth-century upper-middle class social realities. The second-generation American female characters such as Twinkle, Shoba, or Meena neither cook nor clean; instead their spouses perform the traditionally female housekeeping roles. In "This Blessed House," while Sanjeev "vacuumed the apartment, washed the sheets, even dusted the plant leaves in her honor" (143), Twinkle fails to even clean the attic or unpack their boxes, despite his repeated urging. Neither is she "terribly ambitious in the kitchen" as she serves pre-roasted chicken and potato salad from the supermarket: "Indian food, she complained, was a bother; she detested chopping garlic, and peeling ginger, and could not operate a blender, and so it was Sanjeev who, on weekends, seasoned mustard oil with cinnamon sticks and cloves in order to produce a proper curry" (143–144). Not surprisingly, then, Sanjeev

organizes both the cooking and the house cleaning before the couple's housewarming party. He spent most of the day preparing "big trays of rice with chicken and almonds and orange peels" (150), and three hours in the afternoon cleaning the house. During the party, while Twinkle commanded the guests' attention with her jokes, they "form[ed] a widening circle around her, while Sanjeev replenished the samosas that he kept warming evenly in the oven, and getting ice for people's drinks" (152).

The gender role reversal may seem unconventional even for a late twentieth-century Anglo American household, but is particularly subversive among patriarchal Asian societies where housekeeping and cooking are clearly designated as female duties, and even within a contemporary Indian household (with servants) would explicitly be considered emasculating. Similarly, instead of depicting men who engage in stereotypically male activities such as drinking and smoking in a society where most women do not imbibe alcohol or cigarettes, Lahiri portrays a certain gender-equity with Twinkle, the chain smoker, drinking "four glasses of whisky in a nameless bar in Alphabet City" (140). And in "A Temporary Matter," Shoba secretly drinks martinis at a bar with her friends while her husband stays home with her mother-in-law.

Thus, Lahiri provides alternatives to stereotypical gender roles as played out, for instance, in most of Tahira Naqvi's stories from *Dying in a Strange Country* (2001) where the South Asian immigrant female characters are often seen in the kitchen, and the entire plot revolves around Zenab cooking traditional halaal Pakistani recipes, or spaghetti with ginger and onions, or the very culturally specific vegetable, the bitter "karela"; or as in Lahiri's own story "Mrs. Sen's" where the eponymous protagonist spends most of her days preparing elaborate, traditional Bengali dinners for her husband. Perhaps, Lahiri here portrays the newly configured late twentieth-century gender relations, especially among the U.S.-raised men and women to contrast those of the immigrant generation portrayed by most other South Asian American women writers.

A glance at the male characters in the debut collection's central stories—her opening, title, and final, story respectively, "A Temporary Matter," "Interpreter of Maladies," and "The Third and Final Continent"—reveals that although all three are of Indian origin, they differ greatly in their relationship to America and in the gender troubles that influence their lives.

They have in common their Indian origin, their sensitive, intellectual nature, and the fact that none of them is a macho, hyper-masculinized male limited to the traditional male role of breadwinner, but instead each leads an introspective, contemplative life and reveals thoughtfulness and caring for the female characters. These men seem self-aware and reflect on their marriages and communication (or its lack) with their wives or mothers. And in contrast to her other stories, Lahiri's male protagonists in these have less overt power than some of the female characters. In "A Temporary Matter," Shukumar, the middle-aged doctoral student of Indian history, feels compromised due to his lack of professional success compared to his wife Shoba, who is the family breadwinner, and his depression arising from his knowledge of their stillborn child's gender identity; Mr. Kapasi in "Interpreter" is weakened by his lower-middle-class position and his unfulfilled desires for an affluent, transnational intellectual and social world in the United States that he can only translate between but to which he can never physically travel; the new immigrant narrator of "Third and Final Continent" must learn American lodging etiquette and survival skills from his 103-year-old landlady, Mrs. Croft. He thus tries to make peace with his own guilty conscience at having deserted his senile, aged mother in Calcutta by trying to perform that filial duty for his independent, but lonely, surrogate American house mother.

In her first collection, Lahiri depicts varied traditional arranged marriages —some filled with sexual frustration and emotional or intellectual disconnect (Mr. Kapasi's in "Interpreter"), and other ostensibly happy partnerships when seen from the man's point of view ("Third and Final Continent"). She posits the traditional marriages with unhappy romantic marriages among second-generation couples ("A Temporary Matter" and "Interpreter"), marriages that have come to be based on secrets and lies and are replete with the lack of emotional (and possibly sexual) intimacy.

In most cases, however, Lahiri's narrators seem to initially evoke even a feminist reader's empathy with the jilted or betrayed men, portraying the women such as Shoba and Meena as individualistic, self-sufficient (or selfish?) and, perhaps, unsympathetic. Although depicting the gender trouble within these marriages, Lahiri does not simplistically blame the men and instead evokes the reader's empathy for their lonely emotional states by providing the male point of view. Lahiri reveals the emotional

vulnerabilities of all three men as they mourn the losses of their dead family members–a stillborn child, a seven-year-old son, an aged biological mother and a surrogate mother. However, she initially does not portray their apparent effeminacy as a debilitating weakness, but rather makes the men seem more attractive and well-developed as characters for having revealed emotions that are not based on the aggression that Frank Chin et al. validated as "manly."

While the first story is located in Bhubaneshwar, a small town in the eastern Indian state of Orissa, the other two are situated in Boston and Cambridge, Massachusetts. Mr. Kapasi in "Interpreter" lives in India but vicariously desires a romantic relationship with the Bengali American female protagonist, Mrs. Das. As a part-time tour guide of ancient Indian architectural sites, Mr. Kapasi embodies India for his foreign tourist clients such as the American-born Das family. An interpreter in a doctor's office, Mr. Kapasi translates people's maladies and aids their healing to compensate for his own dead marriage and the loss of his seven-year-old son to typhoid. He judges Mr. and Mrs. Das's marital problems based on his own experience:

> [ . . . ] it flattered Mr. Kapasi that Mrs. Das was so intrigued by his job. Unlike his wife, she had reminded him of its intellectual challenges. She had also used the word "romantic." [ . . . ]. He wondered if Mr. and Mrs. Das were a bad match, just as he and his wife were. Perhaps, they, too, had little in common apart from their three children and a decade of their lives. The signs he recognized from his own marriage were there—the bickering, the indifference, the protracted silences. (53)[7]

Attracted to the American Mrs. Das, Mr. Kapasi admires her bare legs and realizes he has never seen his wife naked. He imagines a future for himself —based on watching American television shows such as "Dallas"—in which Mrs. Das would mail him their photos and confide in him regarding her marriage: "He would explain to her, things about India, and she would explain things to him about America. In its own way this correspondence would fulfill his dream, of serving as an interpreter between nations" (59).

Unlike Mr. Kapasi who can merely fantasize about an American-born Bengali woman but can do nothing to obtain her or to get any closer to visiting America, the unnamed first-person male narrator in "The Third and Final Continent" progresses from a newly arrived Bengali immigrant who begins his Americanization journey with the blessings of his 103-year-old

landlady Mrs. Croft to someone who, thirty years later, has made America his home by having taught his traditional wife to recreate the comforts of a traditional Bengali home. He faces no gender troubles, because he transforms from a dutiful son to a husband who is well taken care of. Unlike previous women writers who might have focused on the wife's entrapment in an arranged marriage (such as Mukherjee's *Wife*, or Divakaruni's *Arranged Marriage*), Lahiri does not provide any insight into the wife's possible dissatisfaction or loneliness and reveals only her contentment with life as a coy immigrant wife and mother.

Shukumar, the protagonist of "A Temporary Matter," although raised by Bengali parents in the United States, is inherently an American:

> Shukumar hadn't spent as much time in India as Shoba had. [ . . . ] As a teenager he preferred sailing camp or scooping ice cream during the summers to going to Calcutta. It wasn't until after his father died, in his last year of college, that the country began to interest him, and he studied its history from course books as if it were any other subject. (12)

Not surprisingly, then, Shukumar's masculine behavior does not approximate the stereotypical Indian male patterns but is rather adapted to the American context and his opportunities as a second-generation American who can stay at home to write full-time and complete his degree, while his wife brings home the paycheck. Lahiri depicts him taking pleasure in the stereotypically feminized activities of cooking lamb *rogan josh* and setting the table for their candlelight dinners that ironically rekindle and snuff out their wavering marriage. The male protagonist's choice to prepare dinner for his wife reflects the more progressive American social reality of the times—the late 1990s—and is starkly different from the so-called female activities undertaken by the Chinese American men whose wives were not allowed to immigrate to the United States during the late nineteenth and early twentieth-century Asian Exclusion Acts era and who, hence, "were forced to be cooks, waiters, laundry workers, and domestics—jobs traditionally considered 'women's work'" (Cheung, "Men and Men" 175).

Nevertheless, Lahiri ultimately does not allow her male protagonists to go beyond the gender troubles she seems to initially suggest. By the end of the story, when he hears of his wife's decision to leave him, Shukumar's masculinity and his entire sense of self becomes threatened. Perhaps Lahiri

suggests that he is deeply insecure about his own economic and psychological survival without his wife's presence in both his apartment and his life and, unlike many Americans, has not believed that marriage is an individual choice and not merely a family obligation. Since it is the woman who wishes to separate, Shukumar perceives himself as her victim and takes revenge by cruelly revealing to her their dead child's sex. He thus seems more stereotypically Indian, emotionally immature, and "egotistically fragile" (invoking Osella, Osella, and Chopra's term) than is earlier evident from their ostensibly gender-emancipated American marriage. In "Interpreter," by revealing the secret of Meena's earlier infidelity to Mr. Kapasi, Lahiri allows the Indian interpreter to assume a condescending, patriarchal, and judgmental role toward a seemingly licentious Americanized Bengali woman. It is also possible to interpret the story as Lahiri's narrator implying that Meena's husband's failure to assume his traditionally dominant Indian masculine role may be responsible for his being cuckolded. In a morally permissive American setting, her husband's best friend makes Meena pregnant, and yet the internalized (Asian?) patriarchal attitudes make the wife suffer her secret as a "malady" and prevent her from revealing her child's father's true identity to anyone except the relatively safe and sensitive, lower-middle-class Indian male, Mr. Kapasi, who listens to her pain.

South Asian men—most of whom were the so-called "manly" Punjabi Sikh farmers attempting to escape British colonialism—have lived in the United States, in small numbers, since the late nineteenth century. Although male journalists and politicians including Ved Mehta, Dilip Singh Saund and Dhan Gopal Mukherjee have portrayed the early immigrants in autobiographical writings, well-developed male protagonists have not been represented in South Asian American women's fiction until recently. The turn of the twenty-first century has, however, witnessed Jhumpa Lahiri's largely compassionate portrayal of the post-1965 highly educated and professional immigrant Bengali men once considered "effeminate" by the British colonials in India a century earlier. Through her nuanced and complex gender representations, Jhumpa Lahiri thus transcends the Chin-Kingston gender troubles that had simultaneously forged and circumscribed earlier Asian American literary production and scholarship of the last three decades. Her attempts at moving beyond the limitations of gender also

invite the field of Asian American and South Asian American studies to move beyond the literature of gender oppression. Perhaps, the layer of emotional sensitivity and self-expression that Lahiri adds to her portrayal of male characters will provide a new twenty-first-century model of a sensitive, emotionally vulnerable, feminized/feminist male, and allow future Asian American writers, protagonists, and readers to move beyond the trenchant rhetoric of the gender wars.

## NOTES

I wish to thank Professor David Collings and the audience at the invited lecture I delivered at Bowdoin College, February 13, 2009, for their insightful feedback on this chapter. A section of this chapter was also presented at the Association for Asian American Studies conference in Honolulu, Hawaii in April 2009.

1. See my "Activism, 'Feminisms' and Americanization in Bharati Mukherjee's *Wife* and *Jasmine*," for a critique of Mukherjee who is "caught in the myth of the American frontier, and, thus, doesn't allow her female heroines to go beyond violence, silence and anger" (61). See also the essay collection *Bharati Mukherjee: Critical Perspectives*, ed. Emmanuel Nelson.
2. For a cogent critique of the conflation of masculinity with aggressiveness, see King-Kok Cheung's essay "Of Men and Men."
3. At the June 2008 conference of MESEA (the European chapter of MELUS) in Leiden, Netherlands, Lahiri's latest book was being sold in German and other European language editions.
4. See the ambivalent responses of Bengali intellectuals and the media in India to Jhumpa Lahiri's wedding in Calcutta and to her commercial success in the West: www.rediff.com/news/2001/jan/13spec.htm. Accessed June 20, 2011.
5. Although he doesn't mention the specific Indian groups who are so stereotyped, Joseph S. Alter rightly points out that the "latent ambiguity of regarding all colonized men as effete, and yet categorizing some colonized men as strong and aggressively virile, points to one of the many complex contradictions manifest in the cultural politics of colonialism" (497).
6. See Dhingra Shankar and Srikanth for an overview of South Asian immigration to the United States. For the economic success of East Indians in the United States, see Helweg and Helweg. As Vijay Prashad, among others, has pointed out, since the Family Reunification Act of 1980, there has been an influx of South Asian immigrants with more varied socio-economic positions.
7. Although I agree with Bonnie Zare that Lahiri portrays Mr. Kapasi as "multi-dimensional," I disagree that he is "lovable" or that "he has not been able to interpret his own marriage" (106). I think Mr. Kapasi diagnoses the malaise within his marriage rather accurately. But the social strictures that disallow divorce in India, even at the end of the twentieth century, entrap Mr. Kapasi in ways that Zare does not consider.

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## *Chapter 8*

# Gendered (Be)Longing

## *First- and Second-Generation Migrants in the Works of Jhumpa Lahiri*[1]

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> It is an ongoing responsibility, a parenthesis in what had once been ordinary life, only to discover that the 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.
>
> —*The Namesake*

Jhumpa Lahiri became a global figure virtually overnight. First came the Pulitzer Prize for *Interpreter of Maladies*, then *The Namesake,* and then Kal Penn as "Gogol Ganguli." Her works are taught in Asian-American, postcolonial, and American literature courses throughout American universities. In spite of her popularity both in the United States and abroad, there seems to be a nagging question about her place in the English literary canon. Some of the poignant subjects that she addresses in her works, such as gendered migration of the intellectual class, homelessness, the symbolism of death and second-generation predicaments of belonging, race, and hybridity intersect the fields of postcolonial and Asian American studies. However, Lahiri's broader theme of migration and immigration to America, and in particular her representation of the "model minority" position, is a topic of much exploration in American literature. She specifically focuses on the various nuances of migration, mostly the immigration of the Bengali intellectual (immigration through the special skills provisions in the 1965 Immigration Act) to America, who fundamentally reconfigured the demography of South Asian America. Lahiri's narratives focus on the effect of such migrations on the first-

generation subjects and their American-born offspring. N.V.M. Gonzales's terminology, "fusion of migrancy and exile" (82), used to describe Filipino/a American literature, is also applicable to Lahiri's works. Lahiri's not only creates the first-generation migrant subject as "exilic," and foreign, but also continues to show how the second-generation American-born subjects are both exilic and foreign, nomadic and displaced in both their land of birth and elsewhere in the world.

In determining the place of Lahiri within the canon of postcolonial and Asian American studies, David Palumbo-Liu, in regards to canonization of ethnic literatures, alerts us to investigate "how the texts of a particular 'group' may occupy specific institutional positions" (19) and how "ethnic texts become canonized and reconfigured as they move across national cultural spaces? (19) Lahiri's works have received much attention in India and abroad, particularly among the Bengali diasporic community. Unlike the charges brought against Bharati Mukherjee as representing narratives that are historically positioned as inaccurate and faulty, and her characters often one-dimensional, predictable, and deliberately "exotic," Lahiri's narratives echo a kind of balanced authenticity and complexity of vision in representing the Bengali diasporic community that until now has been underrepresented. Robin E. Field, in her article "Writing the Second Generation," captures the scope of Lahiri's contribution to literature aptly:

> Her books underscore the evolving nature of both immigrant and mainstream American cultural formation, mainly by depicting, with sensitivity and perspicacity, the lives of these second-generation Americans. She explores the difficulties of establishing a sense of self for the second-generation, an experience never quite replicated by other generations of the immigrant family; and ultimately her work points to the transience of "ethnic American" identity in favor of transnational, post-ethnic ethos. (Field 167)

Such representations make her stand out as a writer who has acquired a much deeper understanding of the "cultural clash and sympathy"[2] between cross-generational diasporic South Asian communities. Lahiri's portrayal of "multi-dimensional characters, viewed in multiple settings, displaying differentiated emotional reactions in varied circumstances" (see Lavina Dhingra's essay in this volume) makes the cross-breeding between the first and second generational characters complex, real and relatable to her Bengali, South Asian and Western readers.

The clash between the two generations is both cultural and generational, and has been explored much in contemporary American literature. Given Lahiri's capacity to bridge the fields of the postcolonial, (South) Asian American and the domain of American literature, and someone whose writing has been inspired by canonized figures such as William Faulkner and Somerset Maugham, her place in the English literary canon is one that can best be described as "unclear." Should Lahiri be considered a postcolonial writer or a South Asian American writer? Can she belong to a canon that collapses all three of these fields, and if so what should such a canon be named? If, as Lavina Dhingra in her 2000 essay "South Asian American Literature" says, "South Asian American literature offers a unique vantage point from which to view and comprehend this critical time of flux within the Asian American and North American demographic landscape" (372), then it becomes imperative to locate this "unique vantage point" from which Lahiri narrates her stories—narratives that are both universal and particular.

Many of Lahiri's subjects in her first collection of short stories, *Interpreter of Maladies*, are postcolonial (Bengali Indians) in origin (coming from Kolkata) and hence "foreigners"/migrants in America. In her first novel and second book, *The Namesake*, she combines the struggles to belong in America for the first-generation Bengali immigrant along with a different kind of struggle to belong for the second-generation American-born Indian —the "hyphenated" subject. In her most recent collection of short stories, *Unaccustomed Earth*, she extends both the nature of cultural hybridity for these hyphens side by side with the tensions and maladjustments they share with their first-generation migrated parents from India. What makes the second-generation hyphenated subjects, perhaps, even more displaced than their parents is that they share ties to their postcolonial worlds (as a result of their parental upbringing and Bengali "home" culture), but often are not considered "postcolonial" subjects. Rather, they identify themselves as South Asian Americans, or simply as "Americans" who are well aware of their "minority" status within America. Given their self-acknowledgment of being a minority (and often their struggle to blend in with the dominant culture, where they are not accepted as "real Americans"[3]), they are often subjected to a "double minority" status. This double minority position gives them the status of being *American Desis*.[4] They are marked racially as

"brown" and "Asian" in America, and often find themselves "out of place" culturally, geographically, and linguistically in India. While their parents are considered as being *Desis* both in America and in India, the second generation is only considered a *Desi* in America. As a result of this double displacement, I want to argue, Lahiri's second-generation subjects become psychically and physically "foreign" and nomadic and take refuge in wandering as a way to find a sense of belonging. Here, Julia Kristeva's provocation that "should one recognize, that one becomes a foreigner in another country because one is already a foreigner from within?"(14)[5] is not just a provocation, but a radical shift in the way one determines second-generation migrant subjectivity. Mia Tuan calls these Asian American subjects "forever foreigners" who are denied complete assimilation as "real" Americans within America given their "frequent experiences with racial marginalization" (Tuan 3). Lahiri's second-generation "model minority" Bengali subjects echo Ron Wakabayashi's[6] claim that "Asian Americans feel like we're guest in someone else's house, that we can never relax and put our feet up on the table" (Tuan 4). Kristeva, in a similar note, also equates the foreigner with the stranger, as well as the idea of strangeness within each displaced foreigner. This new kind of second-generation nomad, or what I call "foreign-nomads"—what Ketu Katrak calls "ethno-global"—"one that certainly transcends narrow nationalisms but celebrates an ethnic heritage along with evoking an exemplary universalist humanism" (Katrak 2), become the subjects of Lahiri's work. For Shirley Lim, such nomadic subjects who live in North America exhibit what she defines as the "exilic" as opposed to the "immigrant" sensibility:

> The exilic experience, like that of immigration, is the condition of voluntary or involuntary separation from one's place of birth, but unlike immigration, this physical separation is offset by continued bonds to the lost homeland, together with non-integration into the affiliative order in which the exilic subject is contingently placed. (Lim 296)

If we take into account Katrak's suggestion of "universalist humanism" that Lahiri's works invoke and Lim's formulation of the immigrant as an "exilic" subject, then Lahiri's subjects who are both universal and exilic call for a fresh look at how the fields of postcolonial and Asian American studies redefine previous claims of belonging. In *Unaccustomed Earth*, Lahiri deliberately shifts her focus to the second-generation South Asian-born Indian subjects, and plants them in America. Unlike in *The Interpreter*

*of Maladies*, her first-generation subjects are also more "Americanized" and explore forms of desires (emotional, sexual, cultural) that being "American" allow them to express, inhabit, and explore. It is in America that they must either "strike their roots," or uproot them from elsewhere to replant them here.

The clash between the first and second generations is more pronounced in *Unaccustomed Earth* than in *The Interpreter of Maladies,* for which she received the Pulitzer Prize in 2000. It is a type of emotional and cultural clash that causes these subjects to dislocate in more than one direction—spatial, psychic, linguistic and geographic. The dislocation may be read as what Homi Bhabha would say is a result of the tension and desire to belong to multiple locations, yet not finding a sense of home in any. Contrary to Bhabha's suggestion, I read the dislocation of these two generations of subjects as twofold: (1) As a result of belonging to multiple homes concurrently, these subjects have many homes, and it is in this act of multiple belongings that the subjects are split; (2) the death of a parental figure disrupts for the second-generation subjects a sense of roots and routes,[7] resulting in a loss of a home(land).

In many of Lahiri's narratives, both the symbolism of death and dying of parental figures begin to split the second-generation subjectivity. Why does the trope of death reoccur in so many of Lahiri's narratives? How these subjects come to terms with the deaths of these parental figures also becomes central in their acts of (un)belonging to their motherland/fatherland. This concurrent overlap between the death of a mother/father figure and a loss of homeland (that such a demise marks) is an exploration that cannot be over-looked.

## ON EXILE, DEATH, AND DYING

The trope of death is overwhelmingly evident in all of Lahiri's works. From the death of the unborn child in "The Temporary Matter," to the death of Ashima's father, news that arrives via a telephone from Calcutta—to Ashoke's sudden death in Ohio, followed by Kaushik's mother's death to cancer, and finally Kaushik's own death—is plenty to investigate the relevance of death in the life of a migrant/exile. In this segment I want to concentrate on the "karma" of the second-generation "brown folks" (to

borrow Vijay Prasad's terminology)—namely the male subjects in Lahiri's work. In what ways does the death of a parental figure provoke these subjects to be rooted, uprooted, become exilic and nomadic? I would like to suggest that the death of a parental figure raises the stakes of belonging for the second-generation Indian American subjects. Here the death of the mother or the father also becomes the simultaneous death of belonging to the motherland and the fatherland. It is the death of memory and a disruption of the hyphenated existence when the hyphen itself is disrupted.

For the first generation the news of death of a parent that arrives in America becomes either another step closer to losing the urgency to return back to one's homeland, or the reverse, that is, the loss of a parent makes one's memory of the past nostalgic that one must return over and over again to connect to one's roots. For the second-generation, however, the loss of a parental figure becomes a loss of both root and route. It is a loss of root given that these parental figures are the only reminder on an on-going basis for the second-generation regarding their ties to their ancestral homeland. It is a loss of route since the very parental figures that migrated to America or elsewhere, carrying with them the stories and cultures of the past and the trajectory of their travels are now dead.

The news of death of a loved one for a first-generation migrant often doesn't provide immediate closure (particularly when the death takes place in their homeland), and imposes a painful reminder of one's split from his/her home(land). Kristeva calls this loss "a secret wound, often unknown to himself, drives the foreigner to wandering" (Kristeva 5). This wandering, however, is more apt for Lahiri's second-generation subjects than the first. I want to invoke here the figure of Gogol from Lahiri's first novel, *The Namesake*, and continue my line of inquiry through Kaushik—Lahiri's most recent protagonist in the last three intertwined narratives in the *Unaccustomed Earth*. The last three intertwined narratives in the collection *Unaccustomed Earth* will speak directly to the kind of fragmentation, displacement, and mutilation the second-generation, American-born, Indo-American subjects face. Contrary to the suggestion that for the second generation the sense of dislocation and rupture is caused by a clash between the culture of their parents and their own American identity, I would like to offer an alternative reading; that is, their rupture is caused by the death and dying of a parental figure. Ironically an untimely death of a parental figure

becomes the site of mourning and melancholia[8] and profound loss for Gogol and Kaushik's relationships to both India and America—a loss that disables their relationship to their origins. It is perhaps, as Lavina Dhingra notes in her chapter in this volume, "Moving Beyond Asian American Literary Gender Wars in Jhumpa Lahiri's Fiction," that Lahiri's males "are portrayed as more nurturing, giving, and forgiving" than her female characters also manifests into a kind of emotional fragileness that contributes to modes of experiencing mourning and melancholia.

Both Gogol and Kaushik experience mourning and melancholia. This symptomatic distinction between mourning and melancholia is best summed by Freud's claim that "in grief the world becomes poor and empty; in melancholia it is the ego itself."[9] Mourning indicates a psychic state of recognized loss, a grieving period whereby the subject is able to move forward into new objects. In contrast melancholia deals with the unconscious incorporation of the lost object into the libido. While Gogol is American born and only visits India occasionally with his parents during vacations, and never quite seemed to feel a sense of belonging in India, Lahiri creates Kaushik as a figure who closely resembles that of a global nomad—one that seems to belong in many places, and yet never can quite be rooted in any. Kaushik also is American born, but his parents take him back to Bombay when he is nine. Then, when Kaushik is sixteen, the family returns to America, and it is in America that Kaushik's mother dies of cancer—a death that permanently disconnects Kaushik's affiliation to both his mother and his motherland. Upon the death of his mother, his father marries a woman named Chitra who shares nothing in common with his own mother. Suddenly Kaushik becomes an older stepbrother to two young girls and is forced to give up his own room in his house (and move into the guest bedroom). The changes in his father's new life destabilize and disrupt Kaushik's process of mourning for his mother. It is precisely this disruption that leads Kaushik to enter his stage of melancholia, and causes distortion of his ego. Such "dissatisfaction with the ego on moral grounds" (Gay, 585) also causes a series of reactions to his father's new environment. Not only is he not able to accept Chitra as a "replacement" mother, but also he is sickened to see Chitra using his mother's kitchen:

> I had no memories of my mother cooking there, but the space still retained her presence more than any other part of the house. The jade and spider plants she had watered were still thriving on

> the windowsill, the orange-and-white sunburst clock she'd so loved the design of, with its quivering second hand, still marking the time on the wall. ("Years End" 263)

In the midst of realizing his own anger and aloofness provoked by the presence of his new stepmother and father, he makes a profound discovery about the commonality that bonds him with his two younger stepsisters, Rupa and Piu. Kaushik realizes that "like them I had lost a parent and was now being asked to accept a replacement ("Year's End" 272). Yet this commonality outweighs Kaushik's melancholic state he experiences after his mother's death. His final outburst upon discovering Piu and Rupa sprawled on the carpet looking at the pictures of his mother (which his father had sealed and hidden in a closet after his mother's death) becomes testimony to his melancholia. He is unable to contain his rage when he finds them looking at the photographs, and has his final outburst when he discovers Rupa and Piu exploring some old photographs of his mother: "My mother wearing a swimsuit by the edge of the pool in our old club in Bombay. My mother sitting with me on her lap on the brown wooden steps of our house in Cambridge. My mother and father standing before I was born in front of a snow-caked hedge" ("Year's End" 286). Kaushik is possessive, and is unable to share with his stepsisters these intimate moments of his past as represented in these photographs. This inability to share his past results in the ultimate rupture and distancing that takes place between Kaushik and his father's new life. His anger is displaced on Rupa and Piu, and his outburst is extreme and indicative of Kaushik's inability to accept Chitra as a replacement "mother-figure." He tells his stepsisters, "Well, you've seen it for yourselves, how beautiful my mother was. How much prettier and sophisticated than yours. Your mother is nothing in comparison. Just a servant to wash my father's clothes and cook his meals" (Year's End" 286). This outburst becomes the single best evidence of Kaushik's continued state of mourning resulting in melancholia and an inability to move on/forward.

His father's remarriage not only becomes a visible reminder of his late mother's absence from his own life, but also begins to act as a gesture of a second mourning for his own mother. The outburst becomes Kaushik's final distancing from his own father, his home in America, and hence the beginning of his rootlessness and nomadism. In Lahiri's representations of the second generation (particularly the male subjects), we find that these

subjects rupture completely after the literal death of a parent. Gogol's rupture is quite different from Kaushik's. While Kaushik's mother's death stalls Kaushik from moving on in any meaningful manner, for Gogol, his father's death becomes the moment of reconciliation with his own struggling hyphenated identity.

It is only after Gogol's father suddenly dies in Ohio and later that year during Christmas that Gogol retreats to his own room, reestablishes his connection to Nikolai Gogol, and begins to take any interest in understanding the genealogy of his own name. As he sits on his bed Gogol notices,

> The jacket is missing, the title on the page practically faded. . . . The spine cracks faintly when he opens it to the title page. *The Short Stories of Nikolai Gogol*. "For Gogol Ganguli," . . . the man who gave you his name, from the man who gave you your name" is written within quotation marks. . . . His father had stood in the doorway, just there, an arm's reach from where he sits now. He had left him to discover the inscription on his own, never again asking Gogol what he'd thought of the book, never mentioning the book at all. The name he had so detested, here hidden and preserved—that was the first thing his father had given him. (*Namesake* 289)

He starts to read "The Overcoat" from the book that his father had given him for his fourteenth birthday. His father is now dead, yet the book stands in-between them reminding Gogol of his father's life. The act of reading serves as a symbolic gesture of both mourning and remembering his father. While Gogol can engage in the act of mourning by simply reading and reflecting, Kaushik, on the other hand, never quite has the time, or what he calls the "privilege" to mourn. "Being with her through her illness day after day," Kaushik says, "denied us the privilege" ("Year's End" 253) to mourn her passing.

Long before his mother dies, Kaushik begins to prepare for her death. When he returns to Boston and his family is living with Hema's (until they find the house his mother really wants), Kaushik spends isolated time walking through the woods. It is in these woods that Kaushik reveals his wish to Hema: "It makes me wish we weren't Hindu so that my mother could be buried somewhere. But she's made us promise we'll scatter her ashes into the Atlantic" ("Once in a Lifetime" 249). Somehow, the idea that his mother's ashes will be scattered in the Atlantic doesn't sit well with Kaushik. It is the scattering of the ashes in a foreign land, in a foreign ocean, that permanently disconnect Kaushik's ties to his mother and

motherland. Latently, Kaushik wishes that the last rituals of his mother be performed in India and is troubled when such a desire is never quite expressed by him. Unlike Gogol, who never quite liked visiting India, Kaushik admits to Hema that he actually liked living in India and feels a bond with the country.

The metaphor and symbolism of death and sickness in the parental figures of second-generation South Asian immigrants distances them from their motherland and fatherland. This distancing other than causing a symbolic death of the origin, often mutilates, fragments, and disables the second-generation psyche in more than one way—causing a sense of bewilderment and wandering, a wandering that is directionless, a wandering that ultimately leads to a demise, and that, too, in isolation. Upon the deaths of these parental figures, this mutilation is deferred and transferred to the second-generation American-born subjects, who "strike their roots into unaccustomed earth"[10] (from the epigraph by Nathaniel Hawthorne). Yet, we find that both Gogol and Kaushik are newly planted in a country where they have no ancestors, no previous roots, and as a result struggle to survive within their hyphenated bodies and selves. In this "unaccustomed earth" both Kaushik and Gogol are uncertain as to what their future holds. When Gogol finally opens the first few pages of *The Short Stories of Nikolai Gogol* he notices the chronology of the author's life: "Born March 20, 1809. The death of his father, 1825. Publishes his first story, 1830. Travels to Rome, 1837. Dies 1852, one month before his forty-third birthday" (*Namesake* 289). Gogol realizes that in another ten years he will be the author Gogol's age and questions about his own state of mortality come to his mind. Will he ever marry again and have "a child to name"? (289) he wonders.

It is important to understand that Gogol's maladjustment and struggle to understand his place in America that manifests into symptoms of mourning starts long before his father actually dies. Apart from the parallel with Nikolai Gogol's life that Gogol fears (the author's short life, life-long depression and melancholia[11] and one who dies as a virgin), his name alone is a source of much trauma and mourning for Gogol who struggles to find a home in both America and India. Gogol's self-alienation and loss of agency with self-identification begins when it strikes Gogol one day that "no one he knows in the world, in Russia or India or America, or anywhere, shares

his name" (78). Although being in such a position with a unique name could have given Gogol precisely the advantage and agency to stand out as an individual within the confines of the dominant culture, Gogol is deeply uncomfortable with claiming any difference. He longs to belong, to blend within America and fit in within the dominant ways of being. His brown body, Russian name, and his Bengali Indian home environment are a baggage that he longs to shed. Since neither his brown body, nor his Bengali home are options to erase or disregard he chooses to change his name. For Gogol such a name alone provokes mourning and becomes the ultimate act of cultural violence that dislocates him into a "third space"—a violence that disables Gogol from assimilating in either culture coupled with a continuous grieving for his given name. Thus, when Gogol turns eighteen, he goes to court and changes his name and by this change alone he kills (at least legally) Gogol and gives birth to Nikhil. This new self-acquired identity by becoming Nikhil is a gesture of turning Indian, only to discover that in his adult life he is often called "Nick" rather than Nikhil.

In her essay "Straddling the Cultural Divide: Second-Generation South Asian Identity and *The Namesake*," Farha Shariff extends Zizek's differentiation between the Imaginary and the Symbolic[12] as it applies to identities on naming. She says, "A decision to change our name, in effect, is our effort to resemble our I(O) or ego-ideal: s/he who speaks without an accent, who does not smell Indian, who does not act Indian, ultimately rejecting the symbolic order of our South Asian culture" (Shariff 461). Yet for Gogol it is precisely the reverse. Gogol wants to at least hang to one side of his identity, his Bengali Indian status, yet continues to be conflicted and challenged by his hybrid desires.

It is perhaps Gogol's inability to completely belong in either his Bengali-oriented home (even after his name change) or the larger American culture (where he is Nick) that he feels most in exile. In Gogol's case, such an exile also serves as his first experience with mourning that on the surface appears as melancholia. Such discomfort with his own identity provoked by his naming takes a positive turn toward reconciliation (that mourning often brings) only after his father's death. However, his father's death also prompts his own mother to finally return to India and spend at least half her time in her homeland and away from her children. Yet, Gogol finds it difficult to confront his dislocated self without the aid of his parental

figures. His father is dead and his mother decides to weaken her ties to America. As a consequence Gogol feels,

> The givers and keepers of Gogol's name are far from him. One dead. Another, a widow, on the verge of a different sort of departure . . . Once a week he will hear "Gogol" over the wires, see it typed on a screen . . . Without people in the world to call him Gogol, no matter how long he himself loves, Gogol Ganguli will, once and for all, vanish from the lips of loved ones, and so cease to exist. (289)

Yet, unlike Kaushik, as long as Gogol's mother lives Gogol will always exist. For Gogol his struggle to penetrate through the inner psyche of his ancestral homeland is not so much a result of his connection to his mother, but a lack of understanding of his father. It is precisely this lack of understanding that problematizes for Gogol any negotiation with his root and the route of his past. Tragically, upon his father's death, the possibility of ever being able to penetrate the psyche of his father, and hence an understanding of his own relationship to India is lost significantly. Given that Gogol's mother Ashima survives and decides to spend her time both in India and America, Gogol is at least saved from a permanent disconnection or loss from his root and routes to his mother(land).

In *Unaccustomed Earth*, however, Kaushik's fragmentation begins with the news of his mother having cancer. He describes the news as "a nauseating sensation that has taken hold the day in Bombay that I learned my mother was dying, a sensation that had dropped anchor in me and never fully left" ("Year's End" 254). Kaushik's mother dies, and as a result his father remarries and brings his new wife, along with her two young children, to America. His father's new life with his new wife and new children becomes for Kaushik a gesture to "move on" and find a new life for himself. Yet, it is precisely in this act of "moving on" that Kaushik becomes rootless. If Kaushik indeed moves on it is by "running away." At one level Kaushik is conscious of his actions, as he leaves his two young stepsisters alone that night and runs away while his father and Chitra are at a party: "My actions felt spontaneous, almost involuntary, propelled by the adrenaline of the state of emergency, but I realize now that on some level I had been thinking of running away for days" ("Year's End" 287). This "running away" from home for Kaushik becomes the first gesture in embracing a state of nomadism and wandering that is provoked by his mother's untimely death.

Kaushik is never able to come to terms with either his mother's death, or the choices that his father makes as a result of his mother's death. His mother literally dies and his father metaphorically fades from his life—resulting in a complete disappearance of Kaushik's roots and routes. Kaushik then becomes the figure through which Lahiri performs an extreme mutilation of her second-generation American-born Indian subject resulting in the unnatural and untimely death of Kaushik himself drowning in the Indian Ocean.

Right before the forces of the tsunami engulf Kaushik, he confronts his rootlessness. His colleague Henrik asks,

> "Where is your family?"
> "My mother's dead. My father lives in the United States."
> "But you're Indian, no?"
> "Yes."
> "You live in India?"
> "I don't live anywhere at the moment." (328)

Right before the waves of the tsunami overtake Kaushik, he sees his mother one last time swimming, "sees her body still vital, a brief blur . . . He dipped his hands into the water, cooling off his neck and face . . . Then he unbuttoned his shirt, felt the sun strike his skin. He wanted to swim to the cove as Henrik had to show his mother he was not afraid" (331). The demise of Kaushik can be symbolically seen as a simultaneous reunification with his mother and motherland, but comes at the cost of extreme alienation, a sense of homelessness and psychic wound caused by his mother's untimely passing.

In Lahiri's work the tropes of death and dying manifest themselves in levels of fracture and displacement in the formation of second-generation subjectivity. Lahiri's displaced subjects like Gogol and Kaushik are not just displaced as an effect of such symbolic and literal deaths, but they themselves begin to inhabit the modes and modalities of death and dying themselves.

## THE FUSION OF TWO GENERATIONS: IN DEFENSE OF THE FOREIGN NOMADS

Lahiri is perhaps one of the first authors to complicate this intersection between ethnicity and nomadism that troubles South Asian American

literature and the dominant (American) canon by provoking such questions as: how much of such nomadic tendencies are a result of psychic detachment from home(land) versus a political struggle to belong within the dominant structure of America—where these subjects are clearly marked as marginal and "brown folks"? How do men and women conceptualize their marginal status and the efficacy of the effects of marginalization? Finally, what does such nomadism tell us about the state of exile and movement within postcolonial/South Asian American literature regarding the psychic and socio-political conflicts within these subjects that constitute the part of South Asian America?

Lahiri's subjects, particularly her first-generation South Asian Indian immigrants, are "foreigners" in America, and hence out of place for obvious reason of having left home—that is, their old nation of India. Upon leaving, these subjects, particularly women, find their efforts to find a new sense of home and belonging in America ongoing. This effort to belong is often described as a kind of weight and heaviness. For Ashima Ganguli in *Namesake,* her migrant subjectivity and her location in America get manifested as a constant weight of pregnancy without delivery. "For being a foreigner," Ashima says she is "beginning to realize, is a sort of life—a perpetual wait, a constant burden, a continuous feeling out of sorts" (*Namesake* 49).

For the second generation, however, the tension is not as much that of the anticipation of delivery, but the trauma of their birth itself in this new land, a nation that marks them as "hyphenated." It is a gap between their own sense of being ethnic Americans, and how Others perceive them, *American Desis*. This conflict is also operative when they return to their parents' homeland, where they are not perceived as *Desis* but as "foreigners." Even their bodies react to such new foreign environments. Their Bengali relatives remark, "Upon returning to Calcutta Gogol and Sonia both get terribly ill" (86). Migration, particularly from the West to their ancestral homes produce sickness. "It is the air, the rice, the wind, their relatives casually remark; they are not made to survive in a poor country" (86). Such empathy leads to special treatments. They "are given cups of Horlicks, plates of syrupy, spongy rossogollas for which they have no appetite but which they dutifully eat" (82). What is seen as hospitality and love from the point of view of the first generation, is often read by the second generation as torture, a

submission against their desire, a duty that they must perform to please their parents and their "third world relatives." This clash, other than producing obvious cross-generational conflicts, often sets for the second-generation subjects like Gogol the stage for feelings of life-long unbelongingness, aloofness, and indifference. This material contact with one's own ethnic origin—where one *is* and is treated as a foreigner—is precisely what provokes for the second-generation feelings of "foreignness" within.

Lahiri in her works complicates the rhetoric of being foreign as she explores foreignness as a quintessential postmodern condition. Unlike Kristeva, Lahiri doesn't equate a foreigner with a stranger (a person), but does indeed link the feelings of *strangeness* that being a foreigner brings to the surface. Some like Mr. and Mrs. Sen, the "narrator" and his wife Mala in "The Third and Final Continent," Ashoke and Ashima Ganguli (and many of their Bengali friends in *The Namesake)*, and many other first-generation parental figures in *Unaccustomed Earth* are migrants from India, namely Kolkata, and are literally foreigners in America. While these women join their husbands as housewives and depend on their spouses to introduce them to America, the men come to America as intellectual migrants and work as professors, librarians, and company executives. It is interesting to note here that Lahiri deliberately portrays first-generation migration and foreignness as a gendered phenomenon to explore the split between the private and public selves and the domestic versus exterior spaces shared by these first-generation subjects. Second-generational foreignness is marked not as much as a gendered phenomenon, but rather a cultural one. While these first-generation figures experience foreignness in America, occupying both a gendered and a subordinate position within an overwhelmingly Caucasian framework, the second-generation subjects like Mr. and Mrs. Das, Gogol, Moushumi, Sudha, and Hema, become foreigners when they return to their cultural heritage, that is, India and other foreign spaces outside of America. Unlike the first-generation women, the second-generation women choose to perform their foreignness in other exotic western spaces based on their intellectual curiosity, or their impulse to travel as tourists. Hema in Italy, Moushumi in France, and Sudha in England are hardly considered inferior or strange, a label that being a foreigner often produces. Rather, they are considered exotic and privileged, allowing them to wander freely. While being a foreigner for the first-

generation women may seem as a confinement, the second-generation women approach their *intentional foreignness* as liberation, a discussion that I engage in a later segment.

Through subjects such as Gogol and Kaushik, Hema and Moushumi, Lahiri not only explores this new breed of second-generation foreign-nomads, but also establishes a place for nomadism as a trope that runs through the veins of Lahiri's works. While nomadism becomes a form of exile—and in this case exile as a form of liberation by wandering—for these second-generation subjects the questions that predicate such a state still remains unresolved. What are some effects of the attachment and detachment to people and nations that is produced by such nomadic restlessness? With the exception of Kaushik, who is American born and spends a part of his childhood in America and part of his adolescence in India, his relationship with both nations is fraught with double restlessness and belonging. He feels at home in both yet feels a sense of not belonging in either. Kaushik more than anyone else inhabits a kind of foreignness within himself prompted by his mother's death and a simultaneous loss of motherland, his father's remarriage, and his inability to accept new circumstances that begin to shape their lives after his mother's passing. It is these layers of loss that result in Kaushik's sense of movement and vagabond tendencies, marking him as a global nomad. Gogol, on the other hand, is not a global nomad like Kaushik (in terms of travel), but more a psychic nomad as he struggles to find his place in the world. Moushumi and Hema's nomadism is a result of rebellion as a form of liberation—a rebellion that is provoked by their position of being ethnic Bengali and women within the Indian patriarchal framework. They are nomads in both a traveling and a psychic sense.

If global nomadism by definition is a continuous movement between two or more nations and psyches, then the second generation is caught in this motion as well, displacing them from within. These subjects are always in transit, always becoming, and always suspended in a state of irresolution. Perhaps being in irresolution, as many of Lahiri's endings indicate, is the most poignant and fitting state of both first- and second-generation migrants.

For Ashima Ganguli in *The Namesake*, her migrant subjectivity and her location in America gets manifested as a constant weight of pregnancy

without delivery. “For being a foreigner,” Ashima says she is “beginning to realize, is a sort of life long pregnancy—a perpetual wait, a constant burden, a continuous feeling out of sorts” (Lahiri 49). What Ashima questions is not so much her alienation itself, but conditions that have produced such alienation and heightened feelings of “otherness” and foreignness. Edward Said would call this condition of being out of home (that migration and nomadism produce) as also being “Out of Place”—“a record of an essentially lost or forgotten world” (*Out of Place* ix). These “out of place” conditions often on the surface look quite normal, yet the overt and covert rebellions that stem from (mal)adjusting to certain cultural conditions produce a series of cultural and social disabilities (in a psychological sense of the term).

In Lahiri’s works we find a leaning to make her subjects dwell in the liminal spaces that produce their “out of place” condition in the first place. For Gogol, his name alone, which connotes his affiliation neither to America nor India, and later his divorce to Moushumi (who leaves his brown body and self to be with her former Caucasian lover Dimitri) becomes a site of struggle to define his Indo-American ethnicity and status as a South Asian male within the canon. For Kaushik in *Unaccustomed Earth*, the death of his mother at a young age coupled with a disruption in his relationship with his father causes his “out of place” conditions followed by his nomadic tendencies. For Mrs. Sen and Mala in *Interpreter of Maladies*, and Ashima in *The Namesake*, their combined struggles to find a sense of home in America (a nation that they have migrated to as a result of marriage, rather than their own will) becomes the site of layered negotiations with their new and old sense of self. Lahiri, rather than concluding the fate of these “housewives” or “professor’s wives” as incapable of adjusting to America, and making their nomadic condition as a disability gives each of them particular functions to perform that portray the complex reality of migrancy for these well-educated migrant women. Mrs. Sen’s struggle to learn how to drive is prompted by both a fear of being in a new culture (where she doesn’t know the rules), coupled with her simultaneous resistance to let go of her past class structure, where she was driven by a chauffeur. Mrs. Sen is a fearful nomad. Mala’s quick adaptation of American ways in “The Third and the Final Continent” with the aid of her librarian husband becomes testimony to a lack of alienation experienced

by migrant women when their counterparts are willing to introduce them to the public sphere in these foreign cultures. As a result Mala's migration to America is devoid of the kind of restlessness that nomadism often provokes. Ashima's constant feeling of "out of sorts" in a country that will never be hers (and hence a need to go back to India)—yet a country in which her children are born and belong—portray "the prevalence of a global identity that relies upon neither their nationality nor ethnicity, but personal prerogative" (Field 177).

Given Lahiri's own subject position as a "double-border" subject (one who shares an affiliation to both India and America, but somehow doesn't completely belong in either) she shares the complicated expectations placed upon the second generation. In an interview she says, "One of the things I was always aware growing up was conflicting expectations. I was expected to be Indian by Indians, and American by Americans. I didn't feel equipped even as a child to fully participate in things" (Bahadur). What Lahiri alludes to as a gesture of a "lack" of participation in "things" becomes a prompt for investigating how such a lack of participation manifests into feelings of un(belonging) in America for migrants. In this ongoing conversation regarding the state of migrancy, it is crucial to map the stake of migrancy from not only the point of view of the first-generation subjects, but also the combined fates of the second-generation subjects, like Lahiri herself, who are equally affected by the movement of their parents from one nation to another. Lahiri's contribution as a South Asian American/postcolonial literary figure, which demonstrates a range of experiences, by privileging "neither connection to nor distance from cultural roots, stressing, instead, the distinctiveness of individual experiences" (Field, 168) allows me to expand a theory of migrancy that does not *only* rely on roots, or routes, but a combination of the two.

## THE AMERICAN DESI WANDERS: GENDERED NOMADISM

One way to locate and understand this new type of foreignness as exhibited through exilic existences and nomadic tendencies can best be captured by the story of displacement. Displacement in this case is a series of doubles: double confinement, double strangeness, double nomadism particularly for women and second-generation subjects. Based on the traditional definition

of postcolonial migrancy, a second-generation subject who is born and brought up in the West doesn't quite fit the category of the "migrant" in a traditional sense, but shares overlapping emotions of homelessness and displacement like the first-generation subjects. To borrow Vijay Prasad's title of his book *The Karma of the Brown Folks*, I want to argue that although these second-generation American-born "brown folks" are not foreigners or *Desis* in America, like their parents (as I have noted earlier), they are also not *Americans* in the dominant sense of the term. They are *American Desis*, "brown folks" and foreigners in America. It is precisely their non-dominant brown status coupled with their American ways that gives them these feelings of being out of place that foreignness invariably provokes.

In this struggle to belong in America, the "Gogols of the world" share similar feelings of displacement (as the first-generation subjects) both in America and upon returning to their parents' homeland. Upon returning to India, the second-generation subject must make gestures of assimilation with his/her blood relations (grandparents, aunts and uncles, close cousins). This confrontation itself, both literally and symbolically, manifests into shared spaces of *differences* experienced by the second generation in their ancestral home. For the second generation a series of maladjustments that takes place within both their dominant culture and their imposed parents' culture provides for their feelings of alienation and estrangements within the country of their birth. While the first generation longs to go back to their country of birth and perform temporary moments of belonging, the second generation struggles to "fit in" both within the country of their birth and their parents' homeland.

Such double displacements result in feelings of unbelonging in both spaces, and hence we often find in Lahiri a tendency to allow her second-generation subjects to explore a "third space" and culture quite different from what they've known as "home." Moushumi, Gogol's wife, temporarily relocates to Paris after she graduates from Brown. Her intellectual interests are neither in Indian/postcolonial cultures, nor American, but French literature. Similarly Hema, in "Going Ashore," is more fond of Rome than any city in either India or America. Sudha, in "Only Goodness," is more at home when she visits London and wonders why her parents didn't get her a British citizenship (given that she is born in the United Kingdom). Thus

“before leaving, she [*sic*] applie[s] for her British passport, a document her parents had not obtained for her when she was born, and when she presented it at Heathrow, the immigration officer welcomed her home” (144). In Italy, France, and London each of these subjects are foreigners and strangers, if not in a legal sense, in both a geographic and a psychic sense. Yet, neither Moushumi, nor Hema or Sudha share the kind of alienation, aloofness and nostalgia for America (their home) in these foreign cultures, as the first-generation women like Ashima or Mrs. Sen feel in America (about their past nation India). In fact, these foreign spaces provide a certain degree of curiosity, exoticism, and adventure that neither India nor America provide for these second-generation women. It is in Italy, France, and London that these second-generation women discover themselves, find love, feel desired. It is the newness, unpredictability and simply the excitement to be elsewhere in the world that marks their foreignness, a foreignness that is at best liberating. Such a state of liberation allows these subjects to not be obligated to fit in either the Indian or the American cultures (where they are socially and politically marginalized) but simply maintain their exotic and “stranger” status as a legitimate yet mysterious mode of being.

Unlike Hema, Moushumi, and Sudha, who find spaces outside of India and America alluring, coupled with their interest in non-Indian lovers, Kaushik seems not to have found any attachment toward any third spaces as such. He lives and travels through many places in search of his home after his mother’s death. He travels without a map, leaving his father’s house after his emotional outburst with his stepsisters, and drives for days until he hits Canada. If there is one element that draws Kaushik to these spaces, it is water.

> Now and again I saw the water . . . It was too brutally cold to get out of the car, but occasionally I did, to look at the ocean . . . The sky was different, without color, taut and unforgiving. But the water was the most unforgiving thing, nearly black at times, cold enough, I knew, to kill me, violent enough to break me apart. . . . (“Year’s End” 289)

It is perhaps a fear coupled with a fascination for the water, or a premonition that Kaushik has toward bodies of water that simultaneously draws and paralyzes him. So, he runs away from water, only to come back to it.

Kaushik's profession as a photojournalist has taken him to many countries—from wandering through Latin America, to the Israeli coast to Madrid, Rome, Hong Kong, and finally Thailand. In fact, the demands of his job "allowed him to permanently avoid the United States" ("Going Ashore" 305). In the midst of all his travels he is still unable to find a sense of home in any. He is a constant stranger, living with a sense of foreignness within his own body, as Kristeva remarks. In fact this kind of foreignness within both his own body and exterior spaces becomes a site of familiarity for him and begins to manifest as a kind of nomadism for Kaushik. He is a nomad who wanders, explores, and escapes. But escape from what? Is it escape from his mother's memory and melancholia that he cannot reconcile? Or is it an escape from the realities of life itself that constantly remind him of his motherless, nationless, loveless status? His memory of his mother continues to travel with him in Rome, a place that he visited "on the way back from Bombay to Massachusetts with his parents" ("Going Ashore" 307) when he was still a teenager. "His mother was dying. . . . She had just turned forty . . . He remembered the look of the hotel where they stayed . . . He returned like a pilgrim to those places . . ." (307). It is also during one of these pilgrimages to Rome that he accidentally meets Hema, falls in love, and is rejected. Such a rejection only provokes for Kaushik further estrangements from his own self, body, and environment and drives him into despair.

Unlike Kaushik, the other second-generation subjects in Lahiri's work such as Moushumi, Hema, Sudha, Gogol, and his sister Sonia don't "leap out" as much in a global sense to experience "foreignness," but they experience it upon arriving in particular foreign sites. These sites become spaces they long to return to, reject, or settle in for the long haul. If migration by definition is a continuous movement back and forth between two or more nations, then the second generation is caught in this motion as well. This movement or "travel" back and forth between two nations causes for both these second-generation migrants a similar sense of displacement—physical, geographic, linguistic, familial, and psychic. Taken together, these displacements multiple times create a rupture in the rhetoric of *un(belongingness*), homesickness, and homelessness, and give birth to a form of movement and nomadism that can be viewed as liberation, escape, wondering, and wandering.

## (RE)TURNING HOME AS A MODE OF DISPLACEMENT

Upon returning to India the first-generation subjects feel much more at home than their offspring. Gogol and Sonia demonstrate their discomfort well. They know their relatives, but they do not feel close to them as their parents do. Within minutes, before their eyes, Ashok 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 Pemberton Road (81–82). They are no longer foreigners. While for the first generation being in their homeland provides some temporary relief of belongingness, the reality of returning acts as another form of displacement for the entire family. The shift in the time and space coordinates challenges them, and somehow they are unable to make the shift back into the Western space with any ease: "Though they are home they are disconcerted by the space, by the uncompromising silence that surrounds them. They still feel somehow in transit, still disconnected from their lives, bound up in an alternate schedule, an intimacy only the four of them share" (87). It is only upon their return to America that the entire concept of *home* for the Ganguli family is challenged. Chandra Mohanty best articulates the nature of such flux here by positing layers of questions that a migrant may face upon coming back to their immigrated countries.

> What is home? The place I was born? Where I grew up? Where I live and work as an adult? Where I locate my community—my people? Who are "my people"? Is home a geographical space, a historical space, an emotional sensory space? Home is always so crucial to immigrants and migrants—I am convinced that this question—how one understands and defines home—is a profoundly political one . . . Political solidarity and a sense of family could be melded together imaginatively to create a strategic space I could call home. (Mohanty 351)

What Mohanty calls "political solidarity" as a way to define home is that for "home," Banner, is "neither here nor there . . . rather, itself a hybrid, it is both here and there—an amalgam, a pastiche, a performance" (1992 ix). This is also precisely where Ashima's continuous longing for her past home, (as if her home is really "there"), provides her displacement in her present home. For Ashima being at "home" and "homeless" are not matters of political movement just in physical spaces or the fluidity of socio-cultural times and places, as such, but also a mapping the coordinates of memory in both time and place in the old home they've left and continuous memories longing for it. Ashima's homelessness and displacement are

closer to an uprooting, as John Berger articulates, “Once uprooted from the ‘original’ social space—no succeeding one becomes truly home” (Berger 128).

For Ashok and Ashima singular home is no longer a concept that applies —for they reimagine themselves as doubly displaced nationals having multiple homes both socially and politically (in terms of legal regulations bearing upon passports and citizenships). They are neither Indians by citizenship anymore, nor Americans by birth. One country *was* home, a country whose citizenship they have had to forego. Another country, that is, America, which *is* their home, is also a country where they will never completely belong. This is precisely the kind of displacement that gives Ashok and Ashima the ability to simultaneously belong and not belong anywhere. They are constantly “in transit” everywhere. Ashima’s name even implies “without borders,” one that can transcend several spaces. Upon returning to Calcutta she will realize that she is truly without borders, “without a home of her own, a resident everywhere and nowhere” (276). Yet, this lack of residence, or home, as a result of having too many provides the ultimate fracture within oneself. Memories of both her dead husband and her grown children are not in India, but in America. In America, she has no purpose. Her identity as “the professor’s wife” no longer applies. The professor is dead. It is through this split that she realizes the loss of her original self. Hence, “the notion of pure origin and true self” as Trinh T. Minh-ha in her book, *Woman Native Other*, notes,

> [Is] an outgrowth of a dualistic system of thought peculiar to the Occident (The “onto-theology” that characterizes Western metaphysics). They should be distinguished from the differences grasped both between and within entities, each of these being understood as multiple presence. Not one, not two either. “I” is therefore, not a unified subject, a fixed identity . . .“I” is, itself infinite layers. (90)

Ashima becomes the migrant figure who must embrace and negotiate these multiple layers of “I,” and without such acknowledgement she will become the migrant figure like the “Angel of History” whose back will be turned into the past, while the wind and the debris will propel her into the future.[13]

This caught in betweenness creates transnational subjects with their scattered forms of trans/nationalisms, one whose articulation of the nation *is* as migrant, scattered in nature as he/she is. Through an array of loss, through the ambivalence of lost homes, Lahiri’s migrant subjects are both

exhilic and immigrant and invoke new ways of imagining the possibility of the human spirit inhabiting different spaces simultaneously. They work through complex negotiations of belonging and unbelonging, identity and non-identity, learning new words and entering new worlds. As Bhabha states:

> This liminality of migrant experience is no less a transitional phenomenon, than a translational one; there is no resolution to it because the two conditions are ambivalently enjoined in the "survival" of migrant life . . . it is a strange stillness that defines the present in which the very *writing* of historical transformation becomes uncannily visible. The migrant culture of the "in-between," the minority position, dramatizes the culture's appropriation beyond the assimilationist's dream . . . and towards an encounter with the ambivalent process of splitting and hybridity that marks the identification with culture's difference. (*Location of Culture* 224)

Like the first-generation subjects, for the second generation, too, their "migrant by association" status also provides no resolution since they, too, as Bhabha notes, encounters "the ambivalent process of splitting and hybridity that marks the identification with culture's difference." In determining Lahiri's place within the postcolonial and South Asian American literature on migrancy, one must be reminded that the literature produced within either of these discourses is still "being written," and hence Lahiri's place within the canon is unclear and still to be determined. However, what is clear for now is that her representations of hybrid forms of identity and displacement that are both "unique and universal" troubles issues of canonicity and migrancy as it captures both a sociological and psychological profile of two generations of South Asians post-1960 that constitute the make-up of (South) Asian America today. It is these already "troubled canons" of South Asian American and postcolonial literatures that Lahiri's presence troubles even further by moving away from immigrant literature that either simplifies the stories of assimilation, or politicizes the cultural violence that such assimilations produce. Lahiri is what I call a "narrative hybrid" as she skillfully tells the stories of the hybrid as a fusion between the immigrant and the exile.

## NOTES

1. I thank Peter Lang for permission to reprint excerpts from my chapter, "Double Displacements: Homelessness and Nomadism: Questions of Belonging in Jhumpa Lahiri's Narratives," from my book, *The Postcolonial Citizen: The Intellectual Migrant*.

2. Mary Louis Pratt's terminology.

3. By taking the category of the Asian American, Min Zhou explains how non-white Americans are differentiated: “Second-generation Asian Americans who are considered assimilated, are still subjected to a pernicious system of racial stratification. One second-generation Chinese American described the discrimination she has faced: ‘The truth is, no matter how American you think you are or try to be, if you have almond shaped eyes, straight black hair, and a yellow complexion, you are a foreigner by default’” (152).

4. See *Desis in the House* by Sunaina Marr Maira. Maira classifies these American Desis as an “ethnic youth subculture [that] not only tends to accommodate itself to the dominant racial and class framework, but also uses a pervasive American means of expressing identity” (77).

5. See Kristeva’s *Strangers to Ourselves* in which she draws a parallel between the actual act of being a “foreigner” with the feelings of alienation, aloofness, anxiety and loss, etc., that a stranger often experiences. In fact, Kristeva’s point precisely is that the act of being a foreigner is not something that a subject experiences upon leaving one’s home country to be in another, but one is already familiar with the feelings of being an “other”/stranger within oneself prior to any physical departure abroad.

6. Former director of the Japanese American Citizens League (JACL).

7. The distinction between roots and routes is discussed by Susan Stanford Friedman in *Mappings*. According to her distinction, “roots signify identity based in stable cores and continuities; routes, suggesting identity based on travel, change and disruption” (153).

8. Freud makes a specific distinction between subjects that undergo mourning versus melancholia. Melancholia borrows some of its features from mourning. For Freud mourning provides the subject to recover from the loss of a loved one, while melancholia “is marked by a determinant which is absent in normal mourning” (Gay 587). Freud defines melancholia as failed mourning because the loss is ungrievable.

9. In “Mourning and Melancholia” Freud states that the lost object may be “a loved person, or some abstraction which has taken the place of one, such as one’s country, liberty, an ideal and so on.” While experiencing melancholia the subject recognizes the loss and is able to move forward, in contrast, in melancholia, the object is not recognized as lost, and there is an incapacity to form new attachments. Self-berateement is indicative of the state of melancholia, a berateement whose target is unconsciously the lost internalized object.

10. Lahiri uses an epigraph from Hawthorne’s “The Custom-House” to convey the predicament of the migrants and their offspring: “Human nature will not flourish, any more than a potato, if it be planted and replanted, for too long a series of generations, in the same worn out soil.”

11. Unlike the author Nikolai Gogol, Gogol Ganguli participates in mourning rather than being melancholic.

12. In Imaginary identification, we imitate the Other at the level of resemblance, therefore identifying ourselves with the image of the Other. In Symbolic identification we identify ourselves with the Other at precisely the point at which he is inimitable, the point which eludes resemblance (Zizek 109).

13. A Klee painting named *Angelus Novus*. In the painting itself the angel’s eyes are staring, his mouth is open, and his wings are widely spread. The angel looks as though he is about to move away from something he is contemplating. His face is turned toward the past and he sees debris of a single catastrophe propelling him on his front feet into the future. This catastrophe, or storm is blowing in from Paradise; it has got caught in his wings with such a violence that the angel can no longer close them. The storm irresistibly propels him into the future to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows skyward. This storm is what we call progress.

This excerpt is from Benjamin’s “Ninth Thesis on the Philosophy of History” in his book *Illuminations.*

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# *Chapter 9*

# Re-Rooting Families

## *The Alter/Natal as the Central Dynamic of Jhumpa Lahiri's* Unaccustomed Earth

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### I

As announced by its epigraph (below), Jhumpa Lahiri's most recent collection of short stories, *Unaccustomed Earth*, takes its title from "The Custom- House," Nathaniel Hawthorne's semi-autobiographical introduction to *The Scarlet Letter*, where the fictional narrator (putatively Hawthorne himself) reflects on the benefits of "frequent transplantation" for the human "stock":

> Human nature will not flourish, any more than a potato, if it be planted and replanted, for too long a series of generations, in the same worn-out soil. My children have had other birthplaces, and, so far as their fortunes may be within my control, shall strike their roots into unaccustomed earth. (Hawthorne 26)

Rooted in his "natal spot" Salem, Massachusetts, having descended from British Puritans who were "the earliest emigrant[s] of [his] name," and reared literally breathing the "dust" of their remains, the narrator describes both his reluctant affection for his ancestral place, "assignable to the deep and aged roots which my family struck into the soil" (26), as well as his aversion, as he announces his paternal(istic) determination to "sever" that "connection, which has become an unhealthy one" for his own children (28). Identifying thus a tension between his "natal" or birthing environment and the richer alternative ones he would choose for his offspring, Hawthorne draws repeatedly upon horticultural and agricultural imagery to endorse the projects of human transplantation and migration to an

“unaccustomed earth” that arguably would provide new and better nutrients, and better chances of survival than the “worn out soil” of one’s natal culture.

By quoting Hawthorne’s lines, Jhumpa Lahiri may well be implying that more recent immigrants like Bengali Americans also become stronger by uprooting from their parents’ faraway homelands or natal cultures, and rerooting in the unaccustomed earth of American culture. Yet Lahiri’s apparently deferential doff of the cap to her American literary progenitor (establishing by the way her own belonging and credentials as an *American* writer, well-versed in the New England canonical tradition) belies itself. Her allusion to Hawthorne also calls into question his comfortable assurance with his roots, as her collection refocuses attention on the costs of this process of rerooting, and addresses how it may not be quite so uncomplicatedly beneficial for immigrants of another time, place and race. Not all plants, let alone humans, survive transplantation, and, as Lahiri’s stories show, for some the process of transplantation is impossible or irremediably damaging.[1] Yet in this collection Lahiri also, like Hawthorne, draws upon a conceptual tension between the *natal*, or the family and culture into which one is born, and the *non-natal*, or the family or culture that one chooses or creates. Indeed, as I will argue in this essay, all the stories in this collection are animated by the painfulness of this tension between the demands of or allegiances a character feels towards her or his natal family, versus what I will call the *alternatal* family (as inclusive of the dual senses of *alternative* and newly natal, or giving birth to something new).

I argue in this essay that unlike her first collection, *Interpreter of Maladies* (1999), which is not particularly interested in this tension (perhaps because Lahiri had not yet herself made that shift to marriage and children), the stories in *Unaccustomed Earth* dramatize, are centrally concerned with, and structured by, the difficulties of these often conflicting allegiances in the context of middle-class Bengali migration and assimilation into U.S. culture. The most telling example of this is the story “Only Goodness,” in which the young Bengali American woman who marries an Englishman and transplants herself in Britain is unable to resist the claims of her alcoholic younger brother, enough to endanger the life of her child and the stability of her marriage. But perhaps less obviously, as hinted by the

Hawthorne epigraph that each story will revise in its own way, this tension shapes all the stories, including the final trio in which the male protagonist is unable to put behind him his mother's early death and father's remarriage to form thriving new connections of his own. Reading these stories closely and with attention to their form and techniques, shifting foci, their compelling emotional power and nuances, poses for me a series of related questions: Why does Lahiri choose to shift away from her successful technique in *Interpreter of Maladies* of focalizing the narrative from the perspective of one character, to alternating viewpoints or third person narration in *Unaccustomed Earth*? Could this have something to do with her central focus on her characters' alternation from one family to another? Why are all the main characters in these stories (both men and women) caught in the effort to move between two or more families or communities? What happens to families as a whole when individual members seek to reroot? How is each family affected by the beginning of a new family that branches off from it? Why is adulthood defined or crisis produced in each of these stories in terms of this (in)ability to reconcile or balance the competing claims of natal and alternatal families? Why do some protagonists fail while others succeed?

More broadly, how can we contextualize this central dynamic or tension in terms of Lahiri's larger concerns with migration and assimilation as a postcolonial and Asian American writer? To what extent does this dynamic (placed in the context of protagonists located between at least two different cultural traditions, between India and the United States, and different claims of home and identity), become a mode of articulating the tensions of living between two cultures and communities: between one cultural tradition that might be analogous to one's natal family, to which one is born, and to which Lahiri's characters are tied through parental connections and expectations; and rerooting/re*routing* to another one that one has adopted, or chosen, or adapted to through immigration and assimilation? What are the limits and difficulties that Lahiri dramatizes for both first- and second-generation Bengali-Americans and more generally for immigrant Americans through this dynamic?

In everyday English, the language in which Lahiri writes, the term "family" can refer confusingly to either of two groups: the family of an individual's birth or adoption; as well as the family that s/he creates through

choice or procreation. But, we might ask, why does ordinary English lack clear terminology to distinguish between these two notions of "family"? What deeper psychological or cultural difficulties does this lack intimate? Lahiri's language tellingly illustrates this confusion. In "Unaccustomed Earth," the first and title story of the collection, Ruma, the thirty-eight-year-old protagonist, a Bengali American woman married to a Euro-American, is torn after her mother's death between the desire to fulfill what she imagines is the Bengali cultural expectation that she should invite her father to live with her and her husband and child in Seattle, and her concern about losing the independence of this new unit: "it would mean an end to *the family she'd created on her own*: herself and Adam and Akash" (7). But four pages later, she thinks of "the connections *her family* had formed to America, her parents' circle of Bengali friends in Pennsylvania and New Jersey," that is, of her parents' nuclear family and its formation in the context of a broader transplanted community and location (11; my emphases). Why is the term "family" in the singular used to denote both kinds of families that pull her in opposite directions? Why at no point do we hear of plural *families* to which these characters simultaneously belong? Why is this notion of family not inclusive of both? Again in "Only Goodness," Sudha, also in her late thirties, a Bengali American woman recently married to an Englishman, and living in London, is misguided by her sense of guilt and obligation to what she repeatedly terms "her family" (as opposed to her new connection with her husband) (148, 150, 151). She is so committed to that first family that she is surprised when her brother does not use Mukherjee "their [Bengali] *family* surname" in the letter he addresses to her (158), and, more importantly, tragically fails in her responsibility to her own second or "fledgling *family*" (i.e., her husband and child) (173; my emphases).

In theorizing concepts of family, and how they may be deployed in different situations and societies, social scientists by contrast have devised a number of terms and distinctions to grapple with the phenomena they study. To explore changes in familial structures with the advent of industrialization and modernization in modern western and non-western societies, sociologists usually contrast the *nuclear* family, "a form of family organization typically consisting of a husband, wife, and the children who are their offspring," with the *extended* family, "a form of family organization that combines several generations and a variety of different

kinship relations, as when grandparents, aunts or uncles live together with a traditional nuclear family" (Alexander & Thompson 221). To distinguish between familial bonds defined by blood kinship and those defined by marriage, sociology textbooks further identify the *consanguineal* family as "a form of family organization that includes the conjugal nuclear family as well as a larger kinship network of grandparents, uncles, aunts, . . . cousins" versus the *conjugal nuclear* family as "a form of family organization that emphasizes the marital bond and the nuclear family" (Alexander & Thompson 221).[2] While necessary for understanding the complications of shifting from pre-industrial to modern or postmodern living conditions (in western as well as non-western societies), from allegiance to larger networks to greater individual autonomy but also to atomization and isolation, these definitions fail to capture the opposition that Lahiri sets up because they emerge from the outside "objective" perspective of someone looking in at types of family units, rather than from the inside "subjective" perspective of individuals located within them, and often simultaneously belonging to both *natal* and what I call *alternatal* families. Moreover, these definitions also assume traditional heterosexual marriage as the basis for family organization, rather than the flexible multiplicity of non-traditional arrangements (e.g., same sex-partnerships, single or unmarried parent households, cohabiting, or step-parent and step-sibling families), that constitute contemporary familial organizations.

Anthropologists get somewhat closer to highlighting the location of the individual within different families: "One can distinguish one's *natal family* or *family of orientation*, the family into which one is born, from one's *family of procreation*, the family one creates through, and following, one's marriage. The difference in perspective is between that of a child and that of a spouse, so that the same family can be both to different kin types" (Parkin 30; emphasis in original). While this textbook definition usefully distinguishes two kinds of family in terms of the individual experiencing them, it still privileges marriage and procreation as the definitive rites of passage or processes of shift from one family to next. This excludes the many more informal or tenuous stages of non-marital, pre-marital, or non-procreative commitments that individuals may form with others, sexual, romantic, or emotional, and the formation of alternative networks of communities that strain prior commitments to natal family, or even threaten

to replace or displace them. In her illuminating critique of the dominant nuclear family model that undergirds American discourses, institutions, and public policies, feminist legal scholar Martha Fineman has nominated this limiting concept "the sexual family," constituted by the "romantic sexual affiliation" between two adults, as the template that underlies even alternative arrangements such as same-sex families, and de-legitimizes others that do not fit, disallowing benefits and responsibilities such as visitation rights or health insurance for individuals who exist in affiliations outside this sanctioned mode (145–76). By coining the term "*alternatal*," I would like to create a more capacious concept that would include all such alternative affiliations that can in the best of worlds enrich individual emotional lives, and multiply an individual's commitments and communities, even as they require a coexistence with, and reassessment (though not a rejection) of those primal or prior natal bonds.

My concept of the *alternatal* thus both includes and exceeds the familial models Lahiri presents in her fiction, enabling us to both appreciate and to critique her work. Lahiri's stories remain limited to the heterosexual family model, without ever extending to same-sex or single-parent familial arrangements. (Homosexuality is mentioned only once in *Unaccustomed Earth*—regarding the gay neighbors that Ruma the isolated protagonist caught up in her own family drama fails to get to know [34].) But Lahiri's stories do contrast the natal or birth family with a variety of alternatal forms that include nuclear procreative families as well as non-procreative and even non-sexual affiliations that form alternative and often long-lasting communities that pull against the natal. The homesick Bengali graduate student Pranab in "Hell-Heaven," for example, becomes an adopted uncle and honorary family member for the little girl narrator, whose equally homesick Bengali parents become his alternatal family in Boston, forming a community that outlasts even his marriage.

Judging by the first reviews in prominent newspapers and magazines in Britain and the United States, the reception of *Unaccustomed Earth* (which topped the *New York Times* bestseller list immediately upon its release), has been overwhelmingly positive and surprisingly discerning of both style and content, finding Lahiri's new collection even better than her 1999 first collection *Interpreter of Maladies* (which won the Pulitzer Prize in 2000) and her 2003 novel *The Namesake*. Most reviewers begin by observing

Lahiri's modest, unpretentious, un-gimmicky prose style, her carefully limited scope "domestic in scale" that does not presume, as Parker notes approvingly in *TLS*, to address "large themes" such as "the state of the nation, globalization, 9/11."[3] In a typical assessment, writes Lev Grossman, in *Time*:

> Lahiri is a miniaturist, a microcosmologist . . . Everyone in Lahiri's fiction is pulled in at least six directions at once, parents pull characters backward in time; children pull them forward. America pulls them west; India pulls them east. The need to marry pulls them outward; the need for solitude pulls them inward. . . . Lahiri's stories are grave, quiet and slow . . . They don't bribe you with humor or plot twists or flashy language; they extract a steep upfront investment of time from the reader before they return their hard, dense nuggets of truth.

Writing in 2008, most reviewers understood quickly almost as a cliché that Lahiri's basic subject is the balancing act that first- and second-generation immigrants must continually perform, living between cultures and traditions. Her Bengali American "characters tend to be immigrants from India and their American-reared children, exiles who straddle two countries, two cultures, and belong to neither. . . . Their children too are often emotional outsiders," concurs Michiko Kakutani for *The New York Times*. "Many of her stories follow with sympathy the next generation as it walks the tightrope between the fetishized expectation of two cultures: from the Indian parents, the unrelenting pressure to excel and to follow duty, and from American surroundings the even less realistic pressure to strike the gold of self-fulfillment and of perfect love discovered instead of arranged," writes Sarah Kerr, in *The New York Review of Books*. Indeed the anonymous blurb of *Good Housekeeping* echoes Kerr's language, pared down to an even simpler opposition: "Lahiri's protagonists valiantly walk the tightrope between personal choice and family expectation."

While not untrue, these neat binary formulas disallow the complexities that Lahiri presents so powerfully in her deceptively simple stories: for a woman who is at once daughter, sister, wife and mother, *both* her first and second families exert expectations; moreover, parents are not the only ones to impose "expectations," children do too, as exemplified by the daughter in "Unaccustomed Earth," who by the end recognizes her own desperate need for her father to move in with her family as she continues to mourn her mother's sudden death, but is unexpectedly thwarted by the father who, despite his concern for her well-being, pulls away to seek a quieter self-

fulfillment with another woman. Natal families in Lahiri's work are not simply retrogressive sites of restraint and limitation from which the protagonist must pull forward to seek freedom, but, in a more non-teleological cosmos, they are also deeply loved, needed, desired, and missed, sites of comfort, rootedness, longing, or irrevocable loss, which the protagonist wishes to recover and retain as s/he moves through life and forms new alliances, or sites to which s/he wishes to return. The challenge for Lahiri's protagonists is how to build ways to produce an ideal coexistence of natal and alternatal familial ties that remain healing and regenerative, and it is this challenge that for them produces crisis. The stories in *Unaccustomed Earth*, unlike *Interpreter of Maladies*, are thus primarily concerned with the so-called "sandwich generation," with protagonists sandwiched between parents and children, pulled in different directions by lovers or spouses, and their varying needs and love for all. The more percipient reviewers note the recurrence of various general themes or motifs in this collection: the "trauma" of immigration for first and second generation (Kerr), "restlessness," the "loss of family members" particularly mothers (Parker), "conflicted hearts," "silences" and emotional alienation of individuals even within apparently stable marriages, "missed opportunities and avoidable grief" (Kakutani), "couples and families joining, coming apart, dealing with immigration, death, and estrangement," (Kachka). But none have noticed this central tension I discuss here between *kinds* of families, or the simultaneous need for and demands of the natal family as well as (procreative or non-procreative) alternatal ones. Some characters manage to construct a healthy balance, others are permanently scarred, and, I would argue, the arc of the collection as a whole seeks to investigate why some fail and others do not.

In a March 2008 interview with Robert Hughes of *The Wall Street Journal*, Lahiri states that she "conceived of [*Unaccustomed Earth*] as a whole," as "a greater whole," not as a mere "collection of stories" like her first collection, *Interpreter*, which she wrote "intermittently" as "apprentice work," not expecting those early stories to "become a book" (W10). Hence her frustration with readers who see her new book as less than a novel, as a mere "assortment":

> . . . people don't regard short-story collections as substantial. They think of them as a chocolate box, an assorted thing. You present it and readers can say, I like that one, that was my favorite, I like the orange cream. Whereas with a novel I think they regard it more as a thing of substance, an entrée.

The eight stories in *Unaccustomed Earth* are divided into two groups: the first five (in Part One) apparently discrete and self-contained, with no overlapping characters, and the last three as a sub-unit (in Part Two, subtitled "Hema and Kaushik") clearly overlapping, comprising a novella, told from alternating viewpoints by two characters who reconnect in adulthood after a childhood acquaintanceship. But this division is deceptive, for all the stories are in fact intricately interconnected. One reviewer has even complained that the "thematic repetitions from story to story threaten tedium instead of building to effect."[4] But the structure of *Unaccustomed Earth* does not just enact variations on the same theme, nor is the collection structured on linear principles to privilege the ending as a site of resolution or (dis)closure. Instead, the stories are arranged to produce a prismatic effect of reseeing a central problematic as it rotates through different refractions, different angles, with unexpected twists and surprises. The book *is* unified, as Lahiri indicates, in its abiding concern with exploring how natal and alternatal families exert pressure upon first- and second-generation Bengali immigrants in the United States, but it is necessarily and productively diverse in considering different situations, emotional predicaments, characters, in an integrated collection of stories that ask to be read contrapuntally, that reflect off and contrast with each other, and hence illuminate and enrich each other, asking for readings that would be disabled if focused on any story in isolation.

Noelle Brada-Williams has argued that Lahiri's *Interpreter of Maladies* is a "short story cycle," defined by "a single theme tying every story together" (455). The common theme she identifies in it, after rejecting others that occur in some but not all the stories (troubled marriages, experience of immigration) are rituals of "extreme care and neglect," that recur (but are not central) in all nine stories (455–56). However Brada-Williams renders this shared theme so diffuse that her essay fails to address why or how that theme always concerns South Asian Americans. I propose that *Unaccustomed Earth* is designed, by contrast, as much more of a short story cycle, where the issue of negotiating between families across generations

and cultures is more than a theme—it is a central dynamic that impels each story, and elaborates on the peculiar difficulties of transnational migrant families negotiating belonging in multiple cultures. Indeed, I would argue, formally *Unaccustomed Earth* is a *composite* work (like a sonnet sequence), which Peter Barry defines as having "component parts (the individual sonnets) which are at the same time self-sufficient items, and part of a sequence," to be distinguished from a *cumulative* work (like a novel) whose "parts (chapters) are not 'stand alones'" (24).

It is a common feature of recent immigrant ethnic American literature to cast the family as the site of origin, restriction, or formation of the old self from which the individual must break away to form a new self, a new composite identity, often in conflict with what are seen as older, oppressive or damaging expectations of class, gender, nationality, culture or sexuality, as exemplified in Gloria Anzaldua's subtitle "*The New Mestiza*." Painful conflict or distance between the individual and his or her (de)formative natal family is commonplace for Asian American and Caribbean American writing, from the novelistic bildungsroman (e.g., Jamaica Kincaid's *Lucy*, whose protagonist Lucy moves to the United States and finally refuses to even read her mother's letters from Antigua) to the tragic love story (e.g,. Edwidge Danticat's epistolary tale "Children of the Sea" in *Krik? Krak!* where the female protagonist struggles against her parents' objections to her lover), to the fictive memoir (e.g., Maxine Hong Kingston's *The Woman Warrior*, whose narrator must come to terms with herself in relation to the complex legacies of multiple female ancestors). Critical scholarship responding to these powerful women's immigrant narratives has tended to emphasize the paradigm of the (female) individual in conflict with family, where growth inevitably involves rejection of that family. By contrast, Lahiri's work in *Unaccustomed Earth* insists distinctively on a bidirectionality, where the central focus is not on the (male and female) individual's growth away from natal family, but rather, on his or her ambivalent and shifting *relations* to *multiple* families, and the negotiations s/he must make between them in order to root in unaccustomed earth.

In so doing, Lahiri's work contributes to and enlarges our understanding of key questions in both South Asian diasporic and immigrant American literature, such as cultural hybridity, transplantation, assimilation, loss, and regeneration of community and home. Lahiri has been claimed as both (or

exclusively) an immigrant American or South Asian American writer as well as (or not) a diasporic Indian and hence postcolonial one. David H. Lynn, for example, claims: "There is nothing postcolonial about *The Namesake*" (163). Of such blanket pronouncements, it would be more productive to ask: What are the stakes or turf battles that motivate such claims? Why must a writer be forced to fit or not fit categories that are so misguidedly shrunk? As others have long since pointed out, South Asian American writers are *both* postcolonial and American:

> Indo-American and Indo-Canadian writing are also postcolonial literatures. That they write in English—a linguistic choice that influences patterns of migration and affiliation among writers as disparate as Ved Mehta, Rohinton Mistry, Bharati Mukherjee, Suniti Namjoshi, Michael Ondaatje, Vikram Seth, Sara Suleri—is a direct consequence of British imperialism. This historical situation unites all these writers who variously emplot their relation to the partition of the Indian subcontinent in 1947, to the consequent political histories of newly created nations and nationalities which the writers have variously left, and to the construction once again of even newer identities in the countries to which they have immigrated. (Tapping 286)

As the first second-generation South Asian American writer to write from a second generation perspective about both first- and second-generation experiences, Lahiri is one step removed from the writers Craig Tapping names above, but his cogent point is applicable to her work as well. Were it not for the enforced colonial British education and bureaucracy that created an English-speaking middle-class in India, neither Lahiri nor her parents and characters would have chosen to leave for once colonized English-speaking countries like the United States and Canada, nor be admitted into them. Hence it seems obvious to me that Lahiri's work not just fits, but rather overlaps and exceeds both categories of South Asian postcolonial diasporic and Asian American literature, both categories of which it is both part and apart.[5] For a methodology in reading Lahiri's work, then, I do not restrict myself to either a postcolonial and ethnic American approach or critical framework (as if there were only one), but draw upon a variety of approaches (postcolonial and otherwise) that I find necessary to reading with care, guided more by the concerns that her work itself foregrounds, rather than seeking to fit it into a pre-existing agenda. In fact, as Shirley Geok-lin Lim and co-editors propose, what we need is a more transnational framework for understanding the work of writers who cross national boundaries even as they belong to and inhabit various national spaces.[6] This notion of the transnational is central to an understanding both of Lahiri as a

writer, and of her work’s engagement with the issues of rerooting and rerouting, to retaining and revivifying older connections while forming new ones.

**Figure 9.1. NG186, Portrait of Giovanni(?) Arnolfini and his Wife, Jan van Eyck, Bought 1842. © The National Gallery, London.**

## II

I'd like to begin with the fourth story, "Only Goodness," placed at the heart, or at the exact center, of the collection, for it most clearly emblematizes the issue of rerooting, or the tension between natal and alternatal family that is central to *Unaccustomed Earth*. At the heart of that story, though apparently incidental to it, is a 1434 Dutch oil painting, *The Arnolfini Marriage*, by Jan van Eyck (see Figure 9.1).[7] Sudha, the young Bengali American protagonist, stands gazing at it in the National Gallery when it occasions her meeting with her future British husband, Roger, as he makes space for her and begins instructing her how to read it (145–46). She is in London studying economics for a second masters; he is an art historian, with a Ph.D., and edits an art magazine. Lahiri's choice of this famous painting, itself a portrait of a couple in the act of committing to each other, is no accident. Most obviously, it enables Sudha and Roger's initial connection, it embodies their shared interests, and hints more about who they are and will be: she is open and receptive to other cultural, historical phenomena than what she knows, eager to acquire knowledge of European high art as cultural capital; he is an art critic, a connoisseur who selects transnational Sudha as partner but still remains austere and cautious about merging with her Bengali family.

But the painting is also emblematic of the less obvious that lies at the heart of things. While it foregrounds a wealthy bourgeois couple in the privacy of their home, located unobtrusively at its "focal point" is a convex mirror hanging on the wall behind the couple (145). This startlingly detailed mirror reveals not only the couple's backs, reflected in the mirror, but also the presence of two other people in the room with them (one of them likely van Eyck himself), two men who are possibly witnesses to their commitment (see detail in Figure 9.2). On the wall above the mirror is the artist's inscription, "Johannes de Eyck fuit hic, 1343" (Van Eyck was here), which some scholars have interpreted as suggesting that this signed painting functioned as a legal document recording a real marriage. Identifying thus the position of the viewer of the painting (for no other viewer is visible), the

painting intimates that the two men *are* its viewers, captured in it, as well as viewers of and participants in the marriage ceremony. Scholars have debated whether the painting represents a wedding, betrothal, or even a posthumous celebration of the male subject's dead first wife, but the significant point to note here is that this marriage is framed and dependent upon the presence of nearly invisible others, who not only witness but also constitute the marriage. No marriage, Lahiri seems to imply, Sudha and Roger's included, can exclude others, witnesses or family, who help constitute the individual and social identities of the married couple.

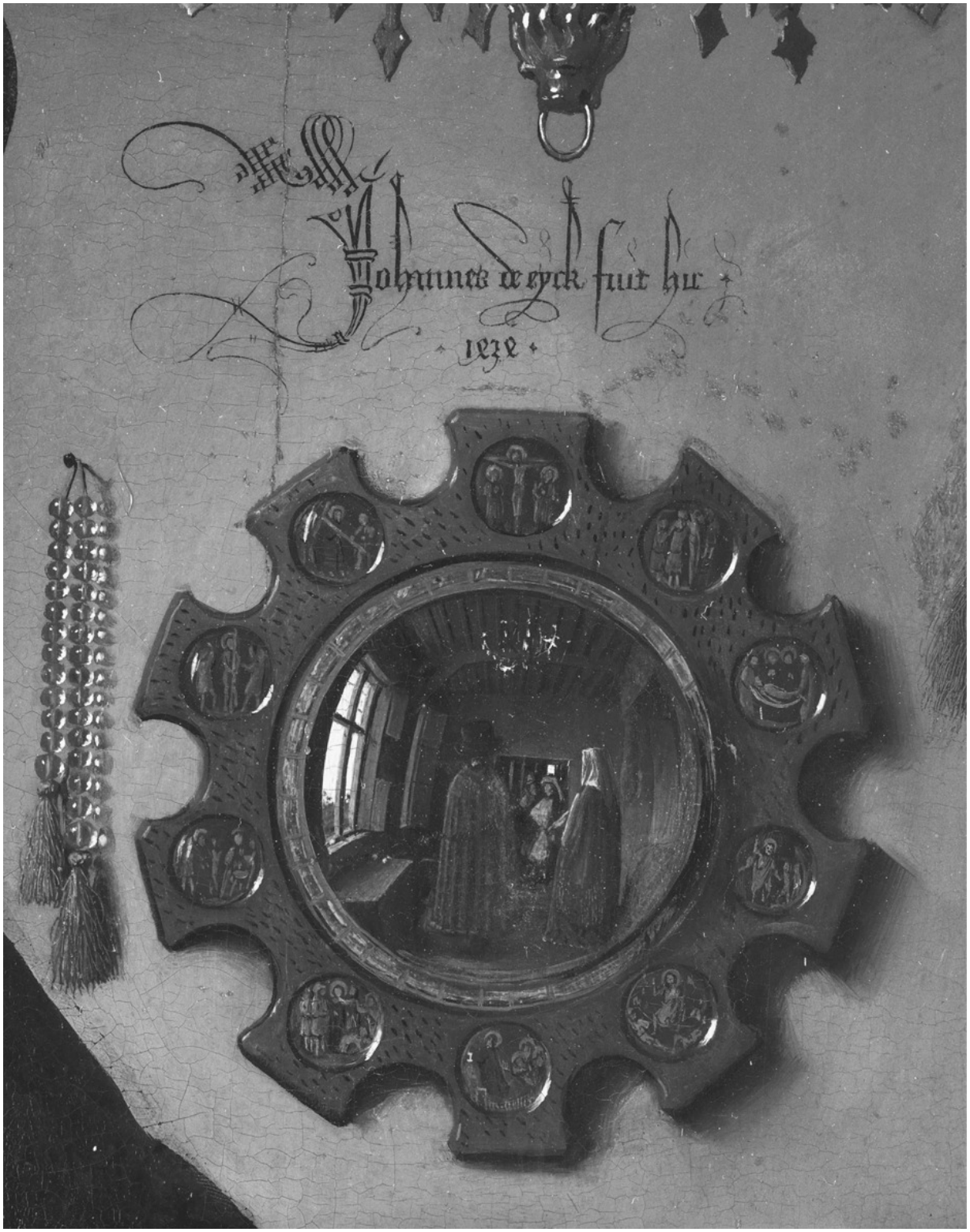


**Figure 9.2. NG186.D1, Portrait of Giovanni(?) Arnolfini and his Wife, Jan van Eyck, Bought 1842. © The National Gallery, London.**

The others who shadow Sudha and Roger's marriage are her natal family members in the United States: her Bengali American parents and younger brother Rahul, who has gradually become a bratty alcoholic and dropped out of college. Sensitive, unlike him, to her middle-class immigrant parents' enormous shame and shattered hopes, and gendered to inflict self-blame, Sudha is unable to exonerate herself for having first introduced him to drink. She cannot bring herself to tell Roger this terrible secret of "her family" (150), because she fears "that he would blame her, that he would judge Rahul" (157). At her wedding, she remembers the painting: "It was like the painting they'd first looked at together in London, the small mirror at the back revealing more than the room at first appeared to contain. And what was the point of making Roger lean in close, to see what she was already forced to?" (157). Here the mirror in the painting represents *her* (first) family's secret, to which Roger must not be privy, as if Sudha could wish him away from the joint positions of viewer/witness/participant. For he has in fact joined (with) her family, though neither side is quite willing to admit it. Roger too, in his Englishness, does not want to lean too close to this Bengali American family, to call it his, or to learn its secrets. Sudha and Roger stay at a hotel in Boston when he comes to meet her parents, not in her parents' home: "by now she knew him well enough to accept that he would maintain a limited exposure to her family, just as he guarded his body, on the beach, from the rays of the sun" (151). In this metaphor suggestive of racial discomfort, Lahiri indicates that Roger's desire to keep his distance from Sudha's family stems from a fear of heat-like intensity, or of sun-darkening over-exposure. And her parents, too, though they welcome him, treat him according to the attenuated terms of a South Asian patriarchal system, where the daughter is understood to become the belonging of her husband's family: "Sudha felt that they were not so much making room for Roger in *the family* as allowing him to take her away" (152; my emphasis).

But the secret presences in the painting's mirror also suggest the continuing secret presence of Sudha's natal family in her alternatal family. The natal family can destroy the alternatal if kept secret and unresolved. The crisis of the story occurs very simply when the long absent brother turns up at Sudha's doorstep in London, and without telling or consulting her husband, keeping from him the secret of her brother's (apparently past)

alcoholism, she takes him in, and entrusts him with her ten-month-old son. Sudha and Roger return from a movie to find Rahul passed out, and their child in imminent danger of drowning in the cold bathwater to which his uncle has abandoned him. That Sudha fails in her primary responsibilities to her child and spouse—her alternatal family—because she allowed the imagined claims of her natal one to overwhelm her judgment, is fairly clear. What is less clear though is that Roger also fails: because of his resistance to connecting with his wife's family, he endangers his own. It is perhaps significant that Roger has no natal family himself: his isolation and lack of familial roots in the world seem to perpetuate his inability to connect fully to form a new family. Whereas she fails to draw boundaries between the natal and alternatal, or to allow the two to mix constructively, his overly rigid, impermeable boundaries between his wife's natal family and his new alternatal one likewise contribute to disaster. And these failures are linked to the problems of migrant rerooting: Sudha's excessive protectiveness of her parents is produced by her awareness of their vulnerability as immigrants in America, "survivors in strange intolerant seas," refugees from British (and American) racism (149). Her misguided sense of responsibility for her brother is due to her lifelong effort to help him root, as she herself was unable to do, in the unaccustomed earth of their new country. It is multiply ironic then, that even as she seeks escape from "her family" in the "protective coating" of her English marriage, her efforts to reroot founder upon the rocks of her inability to let go of that family's claims and of her English husband's resistance to owning them (149). Perhaps, Lahiri suggests, via *The Arnolfini Marriage*, rooting necessitates that the bonds of the alternatal (in this case marriage) take precedence over others, but, at the same time, those newer bonds must remain flexible and allow space for others, coexisting with those even more primary ones that cannot be wished away; both natal and alternatal have to be acknowledged and reconnected in some wholesome balance of old and new.

Lahiri's fiction, however, refuses to provide any easy answers. Though "Only Goodness" most starkly exemplifies the collection's central dynamic, "Unaccustomed Earth," the first (and title) story introduces these questions with more moving and subtle twists. Like Sudha, Ruma has transplanted herself far from her natal family on the East coast, settling with her Euro-American husband Adam and child in Seattle, in an affluent home on the

edges of Lake Washington. Like Sudha, Ruma also has a lost brother who has abandoned his natal family, their parents left "crushed" when he severed ties and moved to New Zealand (26). But this story focuses on the renegotiated relationship between Ruma and her retired father. It opens with Ruma still mourning her mother's unexpected death from a routine surgery, reflecting how much she needed her mother now, in her late thirties, past the stages of cultural rebellion and self redefinition, longing, now that she has a young child and is expecting another, for the shared feminine interests, maternal comfort, and cultural rituals that her father cannot provide. Wishing to return to or recast the natal family as a source of shelter and support for her alternatal one, she is haunted by anxiety and fear of further loss: when her father is scheduled to fly to or from the European vacation tours he has now begun to take, she keeps an eye on "the news, to make sure there hadn't been a plane crash anywhere in the world" (3). At the same time she is also reluctant, at first, to fulfill what she incorrectly imagines is her Bengali American father's cultural expectation: that she should ask him to move in with her new family in Seattle. But, as he tells his acquaintances, "Ruma had not been raised with that sense of duty" (29). *Both* father and daughter are transplanted hybrids, Lahiri suggests, for neither adheres, for different reasons, to the dogmas of patriarchal South Asian traditions, where in fact, elderly parents are supposed to be taken care of by their sons, not daughters, who must belong to their husband's families.

In *Interpreter of Maladies,* Lahiri mostly uses a narrative technique where a character's emotional world is intimated from his or her behavioral details observed from the outside by another character, to whose focalizing participant observer viewpoint we are limited, though Lahiri's guiding third person narrative voice leads us to see more than either character can. Rarely are we given direct access to the thoughts and feelings of the character under observation: Mr. Pirzada in "When Mr. Pirzada Comes to Dine" (observed by the little girl who gauges his anxiety about his family during the 1971 war); the wife in "A Temporary Matter" (observed by the husband) who is irrevocably changed since her miscarriage; the homesick and lonely Mrs. Sen in "Mrs. Sen," observed by the schoolboy Eliot for whom she cares after school; the Das family and its dysfunctionality in "Interpreter of Maladies" observed by Mr. Kapasi, their tour guide. This

technique is effective because it allows Lahiri to build up the powerful significance of apparently mundane everyday details, to show how the material externalization of interiority (food preparation, make-up, gestures, behavioral changes) or segments of speech can clue us in to complex psychic terrain within. One limitation of this technique however is that it requires the focalizing consciousness to be highly percipient and observant, to notice the tell-tale external signs and read some of the internal turmoil they signify. In *Unaccustomed Earth*, Lahiri switches either to alternating viewpoints, shifting back and forth between two characters, or to staying with one main character, describing directly in third person his or her thoughts, feelings and observations. The alternation allows her instead to dramatize the distance or coincidence of point of view between the characters, and the nuances of their flawed relationship.[8] Formally, the alternation reinforces the thematic emphasis on the characters' alternations between two or more separately understood "family" units. The third person narration also produces a distance that allows the reader to see the broader social and familial contexts that a character inhabits.

In the story "Unaccustomed Earth," Lahiri expertly weaves the dual strands of Ruma and her father's alternating perspectives during his weeklong sojourn in her home, revealing with quiet drama the gaps and silences between these two main characters. Ruma's father (he is never identified by name, only by his relationship to her) obviously cares for her greatly, in both senses of looking after and caring about: he is formal, self-disciplined, careful with his surroundings (13), but also unobtrusively thoughtful, quietly doing the dishes, repairing a loose pan handle (27), concerned about Ruma putting her career on hold for too long, fearing that like her mother, she might grow dissatisfied with conventional housewifeliness (36). "Work is important, Ruma. Not only for financial stability. For mental stability," he advises her gently in his terse, first-generation Indian English. And he bonds with her son, the child who is "only half-Bengali" but who takes unexpectedly to his Bengali grandfather (54), adopting in imitation the Bengali cultural rituals that Ruma has abandoned, taking off shoes inside the house (13), eating with his fingers (22), learning Bengali words (45). But Ruma's father, we discover, has a secret of his own. Having raised and dispersed his children (his original alternatal family), and after the gradual souring of a marital relationship

consequent upon the differently gendered strains and isolation of migration and rerooting in the United States, he has found a late second chance for companionship, a tempered connection with a woman of his own choice, a widowed Bengali professor he has met on his travels. But he is sensitive enough to Ruma's still-fresh grief to understand that she is not ready to learn that he has found someone to replace her mother in his life, that he has made another (non-procreative) alternatal alliance. Toward the end of the story, as he is about to return to his apartment in New Jersey, Ruma weeps as she asks him to move into her home, unaware of his alternate allegiance, only aware that she needs her father now surprisingly more than he needs her.

In this story Lahiri elaborates the key issue of rerooting families through the central figure of gardening. Ruma's father is both literally and metaphorically an expert gardener: in their backyard in Pennsylvania, "he had toiled in unfriendly soil," growing both Indian and American vegetables (bitter melons and chili peppers as well as zucchini and tomatoes), much as he had transplanted his children (like Hawthorne's narrator) in unaccustomed earth. Now, during his visit, he literally tries to help Ruma settle into her new home, to put down roots, as he landscapes and transforms her barren backyard by planting vegetables, flowers, ground covering, and shrubs. In a telling confusion, Ruma fails to understand him when he returns one morning from a visit to a nearby "nursery," a South Asian English term for a garden center. "But we've already decided on a nursery school for Akash [her son]," she says to him (41). A "nursery" is a place to nurture, as Lahiri suggests in this pun, to grow both young plants and children. Ruma's father is in fact working to transplant into fresh soil both his plants and his child. He inculcates these gardening skills in his grandchild who plays alongside in the "plot" allotted him by his grandfather, teaching Akash to plant his toys likewise, "not too deep" (44). But Ruma's father is now at a stage in his life where he himself wants to cut back; he will not stay to watch his garden grow, to see it ripen, or to pick the harvest. He tells Ruma how to water the plants, when to pick the tomatoes. She must continue without him, he intimates, teaching her also how to cope with parental loss. He plants a hydrangea for her, telling her it was her "mother's favorite . . . in this country" (52). As a symbol of adaptation, the hydrangea is appropriate, for it changes color, turning pink

or blue “depending on the soil” (51). Ruma’s father thus cares for Ruma, providing her with this final tangible memory of her mother, a source of comfort, a reminder and encouragement of acculturation to her new environment. At the same time he also tells her how to “prune” it in the future (51), for that is what he is doing himself now, cutting back the overgrowth, unwilling to live again with the tangles and pain of young vibrant life. “A part of him . . . would never cease to be her father,” he reflects, but another part “did not want to be part of another family, part of the mess, the feuds, the demands, the energy of it” (53). In this rare and compelling evocation of a later stage of immigrant life, Lahiri suggests, Ruma’s father needs to simplify, exhausted from the effort of rerooting and rerouting as an immigrant on the East Coast, he cannot do it all over again with his daughter’s family now on the West Coast. He is interested in unencumbered travel, not in putting down roots again. Unlike Hawthorne, whose narrator optimistically rejects “tired soil” for new earth, Lahiri suggests that individuals and families too get tired, damaged, and wrenched apart if they must continually reroot, that there is much pain in rerooting, and that sometimes the new roots cannot go very deep.

This gardening trope thus reveals unexpected complications and ambiguities. Ruma has also moved from Pennsylvania to Brooklyn to Seattle, and now she has less energy to create new networks, new friendships. She does not know her neighbors, and has not made friends with other mothers: “It felt unnatural to have to reach out to strangers at this point in her life” (34). She has even lost touch with the mother’s group she had formed in Brooklyn: “For all the time she’d spent with these women the roots did not go deep” (35). Yet this is precisely the language her father uses when he instructs his grandson in the purportedly curative art of gardening: *not* to “bury” his toys “too deep” (44). Burying too deep in the earth may spell death, suggests this ominous language. At the same time, shallow roots too cannot thrive. Striking roots in unaccustomed earth is clearly a tricky business, requiring the right balance, but it is made even trickier when the gardener is possibly wrong, or mistaken. Ruma’s father makes his decision to reject Ruma’s offer, thinking of his grandson’s love for him as short-lived, “The only temptation was the boy, but he knew that the boy would forget him” (54). However, as Lahiri makes clear, the grandchild needs him, too, holding on to his grandfather (or his roots) in ways Ruma’s

father does not anticipate, finally hiding the postcard his grandfather had secretly written to his new romantic interest by burying it in his child's garden, as if were something that would take root, or provide the grandchild with the grandparental roots he desired. Thus Ruma's newly transplanted alternatal family still desperately needs what is left of her natal one, it derives strength from those older deeper roots in ways that Ruma's father underestimates, even as he himself needs by contrast to cut loose, to make a second, different alternatal connection for himself. What Lahiri places in tension are generational needs that, despite mutual love, pull in unexpectedly opposite directions, and that cannot easily be resolved.

The story concludes with the consummate brevity and understatement that are hallmarks of Lahiri's style. Ruma finds the purloined postcard to Mrs. Bagchi, written in her father's Bengali handwriting, planted like a dangerous weed in her child's garden, and though unable to read it, she understands who is her real rival for her father's affections. Tempted to destroy it, she chooses instead to "affix" a stamp, to leave it for the mailman "to take away" (59). The steady, measured clauses of Lahiri's final sentences indicate the stability and maturity of Ruma's decision, her coming to terms with this new development in her father's life. By sending her father's postcard on to Mrs. Bagchi, she also communicates silently with her father, telling him that she understands, that she can incorporate this new move in his life into her life, that she has come to terms with her mother's death and can bear to grant her father the right to continue his life with another woman. The story ends thus with a measured but not broken relationship, a coming to terms with what the father can provide and what he cannot. Placed first in the collection, this title story is both a testament and tribute to the multiple painful and continual adjustments required in the processes of rerooting families, but it is also a benchmark of hope, a positive moment in the negotiations between natal and alternatal, promising no easy solutions, but still suggesting the possibility of healthy growth and accommodation. Here Lahiri suggests that transplanted second and even third generations may grow stronger, despite heavy losses, when new roots are intertwined with older ones, in soils that mingle old and new.

The final trio of stories in this collection, however, unified under the sub-title "Hema and Kaushik," presents a far more dismal picture of the failure to reroot. Read by reviewers as a failed love story, or as a tragic account of

missed opportunity, this three-part novella in fact dramatizes a stunning failure to recover from the untimely loss of a natal family, a failure that extends into the lasting inability to form any alternatal ones. Hema and Kaushik are both second-generation Bengali Americans, having grown up in the Boston area, where their immigrant parents, despite their different class backgrounds, are "family friends," forming a tight community, providing for each other a support structure, a second alternatal family in an alien land, sharing food and stories, passing on Kaushik's clothes and childhood equipment to Hema as if he were an older brother. But Kaushik is multiply uprooted: his affluent parents leave the U.S. for Bombay when he is nine, and then return to Boston when he is sixteen, distancing themselves from both *their* natal families in India and their familial network of Bengali American friends by keeping secret the fact that Kaushik's elegant forty-year-old mother is dying of cancer. The title of the first story "Once in a Lifetime," thus carries several resonances: traveling first class by plane from Bombay to Boston is a "once in a lifetime" birthday present for Kaushik's mother (233), ironic because it is the last journey in her lifetime of migrations; it is a once in a lifetime experience for Kaushik that honors his mother before his natal family's imminent rupture; and a once in a lifetime experience for Hema, as she witnesses their sojourn in her home, and learns their tragic secret.

This trio of stories is again orchestrated in alternating voices: the first is told in Hema's first person voice, as she recalls the period in 1981 when she was thirteen and Kaushik and his parents stayed with her family until they found a house for Kaushik's mother to die in privacy; the second in Kaushik's voice, as he narrates the period of his young adulthood when his father remarried and Kaushik was unable to accommodate his stepmother and young stepsisters in his life; and the third in Lahiri's third person voice as Hema and Kaushik meet in 2004 in Rome at crucial turning points in both their lives. The two first person stories, "Once in a Lifetime" and "Year's End" provide far too much detail to serve as realistic voices; they are a composite of thoughts and memories, evoked perhaps in the unspecified present of the third story, "Going Ashore," where Hema and Kaushik are possibly looking back when they meet in Rome and become involved in an emotionally intense sexual relationship that neither can envisage as leading to a future.

Interestingly, for Hema, Kaushik embodies a paradoxical combination of the natal and alternatal. As the only child of over-protective parents who struggled upwards from very humble class origins to make new lives in the United States, Hema breaks away from their natal traditionalism to remake herself as a sexually independent, cosmopolitan scholar of classical Rome, but then seems doomed in her quest for an alternatal family. After a long failed relationship with a married Euro-American man, she submits, in her late thirties, to an arranged marriage and the socially sanctioned protection of an Indian husband in Boston now that her parents have moved back to India (298). Not in love with her fiancé, en route to her wedding, Hema unexpectedly discovers her heart's desire in her Roman holiday with Kaushik. However her passionate connection to Kaushik seems linked to the fact that he was in some sense fundamentally part of her natal world, the familial matrix of Bengali Americans in Boston into which she was born, whose clothes she literally grew up wearing, and in whose old pram she first breathed fresh air (225–26). Neither Navin, her compromise husband, nor, Julian, her ex-lover, can begin to provide the almost-incestuous affinity she finds with Kaushik. Hema's need for the alternatal is both intense and almost impossible to fulfill—caught between worlds, she seems to need someone who is similarly in between, who bridges impossibly the gap between selfhood and otherness. In Kaushik she finds the (false) promise of one who might combine for her the natal and alternatal, the families of past and future.

Kaushik, however, represents the pathology of a rootless individual who has never recovered from the compounded (and related) early losses of his mother and home. His multiple transplantations and loss of natal family and cultural roots seem to have damaged irrevocably his ability to form alternatal connections, to create either his own nuclear family or to adjust to his father's remarriage and step-family (a second, different kind of alternatal family for both father and son). Lahiri's mode of presentation allows for alternate possible readings of Kaushik without privileging either: he is presented both sympathetically, as grieving, traumatized and so damaged that he lashes out egregiously at his helpless young stepsisters, destroying their trust and hesitant advances, and later, fails to make an equitable offer to Hema, with whom he forms his last and only real relationship. Or, in a less sympathetic reading, both these lapses signify

*ethical* failures on his part, inexcusable for his failure to build not only alternatal connections, but to engage with human empathy toward those more vulnerable than himself. A professional photojournalist who endangers his life taking pictures of the brutal effects of political strife around the world, Kaushik is paradoxically unable to open up his life to others, to allow intimate relations that would make him more than a spectator or witness. He is unexpectedly killed, in one of Lahiri's more bizarre plot twists, after he abandons Hema, by the tsunami of 2004 while vacationing by himself in Thailand. In a rare intersection in Lahiri's fiction of the individual and the cosmic or global, what seems to be a tragically accidental and possibly avoidable end (avoidable for him had he stayed with Hema), may however be read in a more poetic symbolic mode as a realization of the devastation that has already destroyed Kaushik's life. He is already lost, awash in seas of emotional desolation, so unrooted from human ties that he does harm to others. In a moving touch, one of the last surviving photographs he takes is of two Swedish children playing on the beach (before they are all destroyed by the tsunami) as he embarks on a boat-trip with their father (327). A random shot of his co-vacationers, seen by Hema later, the photo is metonymic of his lost chances, of the family that he cannot and will not have, destroyed before it can even gestate. Kaushik ultimately fails to "go ashore," while Hema's resolute survival on shore, despite him, is built upon a sorry, damaged compromise.

Kaushik's condition is an obvious example of what Freud has termed melancholia, where the inability to come to terms with grief has extended from mourning to a more pathological lifelong condition, turning him inward upon himself in a state of asocial psychic isolation. Indeed Freudian psychoanalysis might even lead us to read Kaushik's "love" for Hema as a kind of fetishistic desire for his lost mother—she looks like his mother, and is in fact mistaken for her daughter (239)—where Hema functions as the object of a displaced desire for something lost, as both what is desired and repressed, suggesting that Kaushik's ambivalence is constituted by both desire and disavowal. (He wants his mother; unable to have her, he wants Hema, her closest approximation; but for that very reason he doesn't want to want Hema.) Thus the poignant detail of Hema's lost gold bracelet, which represents her lost link to her maternal grandmother (to whom it once belonged) and to her own past self, lost upon the brink of her marriage and

her loss of Kaushik (323–324), also suggests Kaushik's lost link to *his* mother, and to Hema, with whom he (re)connected in Rome when he fingered that bracelet (312–313). A psychoanalytic lens can moreover help us see more broadly that what Lahiri dramatizes is not only a narrative of family romance, but also one of irrecoverable cultural loss and trauma. The tsunami is suggestive not only of the accidental or the disastrous that may overcome the everyday, but also of the enormity and unpreparedness of the tsunami of migration and displacement as a force of upheaval and change. Lahiri thus ends her short story cycle with the strong implication that transplantations in some cases are cataclysmic; not all plantings in unaccustomed earth will take. In contrast to the first story, "Unaccustomed Earth," which concludes with Ruma's effort to balance the natal and alternatal, Kaushik's failure is linked, not simply to an inability to let go of the primary natal bond, but to the utter *inability* to balance the natal and alternatal, both cultural and familial, a balance that Lahiri's collection overall insists is both vital to emotional sanity and tortuously painful to construct.

I cannot examine here in as much detail the other three stories in *Unaccustomed Earth*, but I do want to suggest briefly how they too constitute variations on this central question. In "A Choice of Accommodations," we meet Amit, an only son of wealthy, jet-setting, transnational Bengali American parents, also multiply uprooted in his childhood like Kaushik, and damaged by his sense of abandonment by his natal family. Amit thus lives with a sense of betrayal that, in contrast to Kaushik, intensifies his urgent desire to "start a family, . . . the world of parenting, fulfilling him in a way his job did not" (113). He "couldn't imagine" sending his two young daughters to his elite New England boarding school, "letting go of them as his parents had let go of him" (86). Now he is constantly haunted by a sense of the precariousness of his precious alternatal bonds, terrified of their loss (91). The "most profound thing" in existence he feels has "already happened" to him: he is sure that "nothing would be more life altering" than having his children (104). The story's crisis occurs when he revisits his old boarding school with his wife to attend the wedding of the first girl he fell in love with, and commits a spousal lapse that risks wrecking what he has built—"denigrating" his marriage before a stranger, admitting to the mid-life deterioration in their

conjugal relations after the children were born (116). The story concludes rather surprisingly with him discovering his need to reaffirm his marriage and commitment (whether his wife feels the same remains an open question). But it is significant that Amit's reaffirmation occurs at the boarding school, the site of his own early abandonment and first adolescent efforts to form alternatal connections, for it is this return to that site of loss/trauma/reconnection that allows him to lay old ghosts, and perhaps, healthily to move on. The title then is loaded, for Amit's "choice of accommodation" refers not only to the hotel he chooses to stay at, but also to which familial allegiance he will finally honor and choose to remain in—stuck in the natal or move on to the alternatal. Unlike Kaushik, he chooses the latter, though clearly, one is not separate from the other: the alternatal is both damaged by the shaping power of the natal, and produced by the intensity of his reaction to that first family.

"Nobody's Business" tells the story of Sang, a single thirty-year-old Bengali American woman living in Cambridge, who gradually discovers the sustained infidelity of her Egyptian lover. Ostensibly another narrative of a culturally hybrid protagonist who fails to build alternatal connections even as she depends heavily on her natal support network (Sang politely rejects the Bengali suitors her parents arrange to send her way, but does not tell her parents to stop handing around her phone number, utterly misreads the man she chooses for herself, and ultimately seeks refuge in the home of her married sister when things fall apart), the story is more interesting and unusual for its focus on Paul, Sang's Euro-American house-mate, from whose outsider participant-observer perspective it is narrated, and whose consciousness and ethical choices it details. Lahiri takes care to establish Paul's own familial background, as if explanatory of his dysfunctionality. Paul's failures and dilemmas become the real center of the story, and his isolation, alienation, and inability to form community or human connections become its focus. With his adoptive parents deceased, and a past romance ended, Paul lacks both natal family as well as the ability to create an alternatal one. He is thus enamored voyeuristically not only by Sang, but by the large transnational network of community and plural identity that she seems to take for granted. If read as a comparative study of Sang and Paul and their ability to read others and form community based upon the richness or paucity of their natal environments, the story is more richly suggestive:

ultimately it is concerned with how Paul grows to maturity, as after several mistakes, he makes the responsible ethical choice not to disengage and remain apart, but to participate in the living situation he is already involved in: both to exonerate himself from Sang's accusation of jealous slander and to reveal to her the truth about her boyfriend.[9] Thus instead of disengaging from something he is already inevitably involved in as a member of a household, and instead of problematically casting Sang's problems as "nobody's business" (a phrase that evokes lack of community intervention in cases of domestic violence), Paul takes responsibility as a member of a community. Thus, in my reading, Paul does not rush in simply to rescue Sang, but rather, seeks first to clear himself from an unfair accusation she makes (206) and then supports Sang by driving her to Freddy's apartment because *she* asks Paul to do so (211). In fact Paul makes this clear to Freddy when Freddy tells him to leave. "She asked me," he replies, and only fights back when he is physically attacked by Freddy (212).[10] It is important that Paul's actions are not rewarded by Sang; they do not result in romantic connection because they are designed to be read as *ethical* in that they embody Paul's final recognition of communal responsibility and integrity, and not as motivated by romantic self-interest. Paul acts finally with responsibility towards others with whom his life intersects, the alternatal community that he finally recognizes as his own.

Finally, "Hell-Heaven," narrated entirely in the voice of Usha, another young Bengali American woman who grows up in Boston, describes how her young immigrant parents befriend a homesick young Bengali man, welcoming him into their home, so that, in the absence of blood relatives, she grows up attached to him as her "Pranab Kaku," as if he were indeed her father's younger brother. The story highlights the natal/alternatal dynamic for both Usha and Pranab, as members of different immigrant generations. As first generation, he longs at first so desperately for his Bengali natal family and homeland that he adopts Usha's family as his alternatal kin and community, until he falls in love with and marries a Euro-American woman, painfully breaking ties with both his parents and Usha's parents, and then, after twenty-three years of marriage, (re)turns to "a married Bengali woman, destroying two families in the process" (81). While first generation Pranab appears torn irrevocably by an irreconcilable either-or logic of having to choose between Bengali or American, natal or

alternatal cultures, Usha, as second generation, is formed from her observations of the intense homesickness of both her parents and Pranab Kaku, and their different modes of constructing (or breaking from) alternatal communities as she herself tries to figure out what will be her own sexual and alternatal choices—cross-cultural or intra-cultural—in adulthood. The surprise of the story however lies in its final revelation, as Usha learns of her mother's secret and suicidal infatuation for Pranab Kaku in the early years, revelatory of her own desperate need for a love and community more fulfilling than her arid arranged marriage to Usha's father. What the story speaks of, then, in the trajectory of all three lives, is the need for a more capacious understanding of family and community than permitted by the conventional nuclear/sexual family model, a need intensified by the displacements and isolation created by migration.

In her meditation on cultural displacement, immigration, and family, Angelika Bammer makes a compelling case for the need to "think of family in more broad and generous terms" that include "sorting out our ties to our various communities . . . for they too are our 'families.'" She concludes, "It is the relationship, finally, between these two—the families to whom we are born and the communities to which we are joined by choice, tradition, or force of historical necessity—that shapes our sense not only of who we are but of our location as subjects of/in history" (105). Lahiri's *Unaccustomed Earth* too makes precisely such a claim. Indeed, Lahiri's stories broaden the notion of the alternatal family to include adopted *community*. Her protagonists struggle, both as immigrants and as members of several families, to retain ties and build new ones, to balance their desires for selfhood and for community. More so, to call on Gita Rajan's terms, they also struggle, sometimes at the cost of survival, to make *ethical* choices, not in the abstract but in the concrete, to live and experience what it means to act with ethical responsibility in the process of building and retaining familial and communal bonds. What Lahiri highlights, perhaps most powerfully, are the pain and difficulties of so doing.

It is no accident then that Lahiri draws upon Hawthorne's "The Custom-House" for the epigraph to this collection. The custom-house is after all the meeting point of international traffic, the official site where the boundaries of the nation are policed, where material goods and humans arriving from all over the globe are checked and taxed (charged custom duties) before

being permitted entry. *The Scarlet Letter* is also about immigrants in the act of rerooting, negotiating between old and new, crafting appropriate values and rules to form a new community and ways of belonging. Lahiri understands how the old police the new, stamping them (or not) with approval. Her allusion to Hawthorne is more than a literary passport for Lahiri's own work and its acceptance into an American literary community: it testifies to the affinities between his stories and hers. Both writers are concerned with how immigrants make new kinds of families and communities, and what are the ethics of this effort. Hester Prynne resolutely creates her own model of family, as a single mother who refuses to name a father for her child, and finally shifts from outcast status to become a central figure for the community, binding all in relations of healing counsel and care.

Lahiri's stories do not carry a radical or transformative political edge, and that may in fact be a reason for their wide-ranging appeal. As critical readers we would be well advised to be both appreciative of her achievements and critical of her limitations, and cognizant of the ways in which those limitations have precisely contributed to her success.[11] Her stories remain limited to a heteronormative model of sexual familial formation—there are no same-sex couples here, or single parents, or other non-traditional forms of familial organization. But, while cognizant of what an author's work lacks or fails to do, I would question the critical demand that an author must do what a critic wants. I would urge instead a simultaneous recognition of what the author does achieve. Even if Lahiri's stories allow some American readers to tame difference, or to understand only difference that is assimilable within dominant paradigms, we need to recognize also that these stories help understand that difference, and that that is no small feat. For *Unaccustomed Earth* does articulate with poise, delicacy, and sensitivity, the multiple and different problems of rerooting/rerouting from one family to another, from one culture to another, the difficulties of simultaneously retaining and forming communities. And in creating such narratives that speak both for and to immigrants new and old, in fostering empathy in its readers for (some kinds of) difference under the guise of sameness, Lahiri's writing builds a (trans)national community. That, finally, may be its contribution and cultural work.

# NOTES

1. This chapter was written before I had the opportunity to read Rajini Srikanth's chapter (in this volume). While we agree that Lahiri cites Hawthorne to establish her belonging in an American (New England) literary canon, my essay also argues that Lahiri uses Hawthorne not only to establish her American credentials, but rather, also subtly to critique him, to suggest the difference of immigrants from Bengal. Moreover, I would somewhat disagree with Srikanth that the second generation of Bengali immigrants in Lahiri's stories "find their place with relative ease" in the openness of America. Lahiri's concern, I would contend, is not so much with the openness or lack thereof of the United States, as with the costs of transplantation even for the second generation despite apparent acceptance into their host culture. In the first story, Ruma, for instance, voluntarily embraces an American marriage and lifestyle of individuation and distance from natal family, but finds, in her late thirties, how incompatible that distance is with her painful longing for that lost natal family and culture. Kaushik, in the last three stories, provides an example of the casualties of upheaval and rootlessness, not because of "individual failure," but because of global patterns of movement, migration, and loss.

2. Such a distinction helps explain for instance why divorce or the breakdown of the conjugal nuclear family in societies like Japan, unlike the United States, can be counteracted by the greater stability provided by the consanguineal family. Sociologists Alexander and Thompson also go on to argue that the emergent *postmodern family* (characterized by non-traditional forms such as single-parent families as well as "stepfamilies, multigenerational families and adoptive families," etc. [226]) has led to a merging of the conjugal nuclear and consanguineal forms, because the once isolated nuclear unit has begun to call upon and rely upon a larger informal support network of friends, daycare centers, grandparents and surrogate parents to form a "new kind of [less authoritative] consanguineal family system" (235).

3. Such approval from a conservative institutional authority like *TLS* serves to confirm Rajini Srikanth's argument about the politics of reception of work like Lahiri's: art that is approved of is one that is or can be "de-historicized and politicized."

4. Aimee Liu, *The San Diego Union-Tribune*.

5. I allude here to the title of the anthology edited by Lavina Dhingra Shankar and Rajini Srikanth, *A Part Yet Apart*.

6. Shirley Geok-lin Lim et al., Introduction, 3.

7. Incidentally, this famous painting is also central to another canonical American text, Edith Wharton's *The House of Mirth*, which suggests another way in which Lahiri links her work to the central American canon: in this case, to a key American *woman* writer.

8. *The Namesake* also depends upon this alternating third person description of various characters' consciousness, but disappointingly it does not sustain the contrast. Although it begins with the first-generation parents, Ashima and Ashoke, about a third through the novel the narrative focus shifts almost exclusively to Gogol, excluding (except for occasional intrusions) the comparative viewpoints of not only his parents, but also of his sister and girlfriends. Whereas a singular focus on one character works well in even a long short story, a novel requires a more sustained alternation of contrasting characters' perspectives: when our access to the interiority of the rest of Gogol's family is limited in the second two-thirds of the novel, the work as a whole suffers from the shrinkage in points of view.

9. I am indebted here to Gita Rajan's excellent argument that Lahiri's success in *Interpreter of Maladies* depends on her ability to place characters in seemingly everyday situations who face tricky ethical choices (Rajan 124), where she defines ethics not in terms of "abstract parameters" but rather

constituted more flexibly in the intricate specificities of interpersonal interactions that work towards building "global community" (139): "Ethics, understood in our contemporary, globalized frame, means conducting oneself responsibly in one's areas of interaction, wherein stated or subtle principles of justice undergirding one's actions are open to negotiation" (125). In contrast to Mr. Kapasi in "Interpreter of Maladies," who chooses to remain silent about Mrs. Das' adulterous revelations and to reassign responsibility to Mrs. Das, here Paul's ethical responsibility as Sang's housemate is to engage not to dis-engage, to tell rather than to conceal, to disable her self-deception.

10. Though I regret I cannot address this in detail here, I do want to note that I share with Rajini Srikanth an enormous unease with Lahiri's problematic portrayal of Faroukh or "Freddy," the Egyptian lover, which reinforces contemporary and orientalist stereotypes of the violent, unreliable, sexually exploitative and somewhat inscrutable Arab male, especially in a post-9/11 American context. My reading of Paul in this story is, however, different from Srikanth's, for I do not see Paul as enacting the role of "rescuer" as much as of clearing himself from slander (206) and going with Sang to support her when *she* asks him to do so (211–212). I am more troubled by Lahiri's only (mis)representation of a Muslim in her fiction than by who tells Sang the truth about her boyfriend. More importantly, as a woman from a Muslim background in Pakistan, I would urge readers toward caution in deploying Spivak's easy aphorism about white men rescuing brown women from brown men (quoted by Srikanth). Alas, given the current realities of our world, sometimes some brown women do need rescuing from some brown men, and this now too-popular phrase has begun to be deliberately deployed by brown men who want to keep on oppressing brown women without interference. So when is it okay to interfere? For whom? If white men must not intervene, may white women call for social justice when brown women are oppressed by brown men? If not, this can slide only too easily into cultural relativism—no one should interfere with what happens in "our" culture—as if any "culture" (brown or white) was fixed or homogenous, or as if there is not resistance or dissent within cultures. Often what is cast as "tradition" is invented or constructed by those (men) whose interests such "traditions" serve. Does it matter then who intervenes—other brown men or women (ultimately Sang finds support with her sister) or black or white men or women—as long as somebody does? Surely our race or gender should not stop us from intervening or working against injustice or wrong, or be used to block anyone trying to work towards progressive goals.

11. See Rajini Srikanth's essay in this volume for a critique of Lahiri's work and reception by a liberal American readership that accommodates and tames difference.

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